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Armed Intimacy:

In Pursuit of Security and Self with Gun Rights Activists in Southern California

Joe Anderson

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Abstract

This thesis explores how a desire to own guns is constituted within locally situated human lives in an attempt to explain why firearms have become such important objects of contestation in the United States. I spent a year conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Southern California with two organisations - the San Diego County Gun Owners and a pro-LGBTQ+ firearms advocacy group called the Pink Pistols. These activist organisations hold monthly meetings, regular social events, fundraisers, and encourage direct campaigning. Arriving in the field just two months prior to the 2016 United States general election, I found the members of these organisations actively engaged in public debate and recruitment. I accompanied gun owners to shooting ranges across the county, learned to shoot, travelled with them to defensive handgun courses and gun-rights conventions, and engaged in long conversations about why firearms have come to occupy such a central role in their lives. I examine how people understand their use of firearms, particularly for the reason of self-defence, to show how the terms of a national debate about guns can come to feed into the subjective embodied experiences that people have of their gender identity, their sense of belonging in a country, and their understanding of existential safety. Important to this is the ethnographer's own journey of learning to feel comfortable around firearms and with his interlocutors. Throughout the thesis I engage with anthropological debates on embodiment and technology; how contemporary gendered and national identities are shaped and reformed in a dialogue between a remembered history and subjectively experienced present; and the limits and potential for an anthropological gaze that reserves an important place for empathy in the fieldwork process, even if this empathy is at times hard to give.

Lay Summary

This thesis explores why so many Americans want to own guns in an attempt to explain the broader debate about gun ownership in the United States. I spent a year in Southern California studying two organisations - the San Diego County Gun Owners and a pro-LGBTQ+ firearms advocacy group called the Pink Pistols. These activist organisations hold monthly meetings, regular social events, fundraisers, and encourage direct campaigning. Arriving in the field just two months prior to the 2016 United States general election, I found the members of these organisations actively engaged in public debate and recruitment. I accompanied gun owners to shooting ranges across the county, learned to shoot, travelled with them to defensive handgun courses and gun-rights conventions, and engaged in long conversations about why firearms have come to occupy such a central role in their lives. I examine how people understand their use of firearms, particularly for the reason of self-defence, to show how the terms of a national debate about guns can feed into their daily lives. I found that guns link to people's gender identity, their sense of belonging in America, and their understanding of their physical safety. My own journey of learning to feel comfortable around firearms and with gun owners plays in important part in the story that I tell about my time in America. I argue that anthropological work should reserve an important place for empathy in the research process, even if this empathy is at times hard to give.

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Prologue

"Gun Yoga"

I arrive at a rural shooting range to find it empty apart from one family at the end of a long row of wooden stalls. They wave cheerfully as I park next to them. Their golden retriever lifts its head, gazes in my direction, and yawns before relaxing back to bask in the warm morning sunshine. This is the first time that I have been shooting on my own. I decided to take my borrowed firearm to an outdoor range an hour's drive in-land from the coast of southern California because I find the cramped conditions of city shooting ranges stressful. The overwhelming sensory impact of discharging weapons in such a small space leaves me feeling claustrophobic and panicked.

I take my place at one of the wooden benches and attend closely to the process of assembling the collection of items in front of me; a Clock 17 handgun, a magazine, and box of ammunition. Passing the unloaded weapon between my hands, I note the hard surface of its grip peppered with raised bumps that press into my palms leaving indented patterns on my skin. After nearly nine months of learning how to handle firearms, I have developed small rituals that remind me to work through each stage of preparing to shoot with awareness. I lay the weapon down and check that the safety switch is in the "on" position, preventing the gun's hammer from rising and falling. I could pull the trigger with no effect.

As I begin the process of loading the weapon, I keep the first two of four cardinal safety rules at the forefront of my mind; 1) always treat a gun like it is loaded and; 2) never allow a gun to point at anything you aren't willing to destroy. I pick up an empty magazine from the wooden bench in front of me and reach for a box of 9 millimetre ammunition, pushing each cartridge into the ten available slots. With the ammunition stacked inside a central column, the magazine looks oddly like a Pez dispenser, missing only the novelty cartoon head.

Ammunition is manufactured using brass, tin, copper, lead alloy, or steel. When the gun is fired, this casing is ejected from an opening on the side of the barrel. A shooter has to be prepared to deal with burns as this scorching hot metal is flung from the firearm, sometimes landing on faces, arms, or, as one woman told me, down shirt fronts to leave small, circular welts on the skin. There is a section at the bottom of the cartridge filled with "smokeless powder". Older gun powders would have literally ignited, but in modern ammunition

nitrocellulose and nitroglycerin interact to expel gasses at a rapid rate of expansion when struck by the hammer, propelling the small bullet housed above the chemicals at rates of two thousand five hundred feet per second (Sharpe 1953).

With the muzzle facing down range, I feel for the well at the bottom of the stock so that I can insert the loaded magazine with my index finger guiding the way. The magazine slots into the weapon with a smooth click. Reaching for the slide at the top at the top of the gun I find the corrugated lines somewhere half way down the barrel and pull the mobile portion back until it hits its limit. Releasing my grip, the slide snaps back into alignment with the frame simultaneously bringing a cartridge into the chamber.

Now loaded, the gun crackles with an electrical hum. With its potential to cause deadly harm, the firearm seems to take on a new kind of subjectivity. I turn the safety to off and observe rule number three, "keep your finger off the trigger until your sights are on target and you have made the decision to shoot". Rule four says that I should "make sure that my target is safe and that I am aware of what is beyond it".

I check my surroundings. Scanning the environment, I tune into the rustle of trees blowing in a wind that cools my face. I notice out of the corner of my eye that the basking golden retriever has just started to stretch, reminding me to release the tension in my arms slightly as they hold the firearm at eye level so that I can absorb the kickback. I find the slow rise and fall of breath that brings a tangible anxiety in the pit of my stomach to my awareness.

One of my main firearms instructors, Joan, had an original way of talking about shooting:

> For me it's like a yoga. You have to know your breathing, pay attention to your heartbeat so you shoot at the right time. Inhale [she takes a breath], exhale [she breathes out slowly], release. The whole effort of, especially precision shooting, but pretty much all of it, is about knowing exactly what your body is doing . . . [It] . . . takes such concentration, if you get your breathing down, I can feel my heartbeat in my ears. I can slow it down . . . So, you need to be in complete control and understand what's going on in your body. Gee, that's yoga, so I kind of came up with the silly term called gun yoga.

Finally, ready to shoot, I bring my focus to the single iron sight sitting at the front of the muzzle and place it between the two at the back. From here, I look for the red dot at the centre of the target ten feet away, making sure that it is also in the centre of the sights. I still my body with long breaths that start to slow the pulse of my heartbeat. After nine months of practice, I still do not like shooting a gun. Pulling the trigger is a process of physically overcoming nervous anticipation. But, as I have done throughout my fieldwork, I set my mind on the task and ignore all discomfort.

Placing my finger on the trigger, I smoothly inch it back, keeping a steady pace even as I sense that the weapon is about to fire.

A resonant crack hits my chest as the bullet pierces through the sound barrier. The sound is a physical sensation. My hearing protection dulls but does little to cancel out the uncomfortable sensory push on my ear drums. The gun's sudden movement ripples through my body, kicking back into my palms as my shoulders find the right tension between rigidity and relaxation to absorb the energy, allowing me to wrestle physical control back from the firearm. A burst of flame follows the projectile out of the chamber as the kinetic energy of the expanding gases hit flammable oxygen contained in the atmosphere (Klingenberg 1989).

These physical sensations break the stillness that I have been cultivating in preparation to shoot. The contrast creates an adrenaline rush that I have come to recognise. Relief and energy flood through my body. For a few seconds I feel elated. More than once I have left a shooting range with a lightness that I did not possess prior simply because I had survived. I had controlled and mastered an instrument that is so powerful that it will literally try to buck out of my hands. Then, as if to acknowledge the strange juxtaposition between power and personal ambivalence I feel when engaging in this practice, an awareness of why I am shooting arises that again brings me back into reflective stillness. Unaffected by my emotional journey, the golden retriever scratches itself lazily.

There is a complex web of interrelations between people and things that influence and define a gun's action. The bounded object that I know of as a gun does not seem to conform to the unity of action and intentionality that it is often taken to represent. The categories of good or evil, active or passive, slide away when it is broken into constituent parts. Various materials sourced from different locations are brought together through manufacturing processes that

utilise the skilled craftsmanship of designers and machinery to create an object with hard surfaces, moving parts, and detachable features.

This begs the question, what is a gun? An object that brings violence and death or connection and joy? That creates or prevents endings? What role do guns play in human lives? Guns can become objects of obsession for those who define their public-political and private lives around defending or removing the right to own them, but why have they provided such fertile ground for fierce public debate? How do they become embedded in foundational beliefs about the nature of reality, human relationships, and national belonging?

Introduction

Firearms, Charles Springwood (2007) has suggested, cannot be ignored in a theory of the contemporary world – especially one that seeks to understand physical, symbolic, and structural forms of violence. Guns are present in almost all human societies, yet more often than not they remain concealed and unexamined. Their use and the ideologies that might spring up around them provide fertile ground to explore the relationship between material, symbolic, and embodied practices through which people make sense of the world (Springwood 2007: 21). In this thesis I take a step back from the gun as a whole object and show how its materials enter into motion with bodies, identities, and social relationships to create novel physiological states. This is an attempt to demystify the gun, emptying it of content so that I can explore how meaning can become attached to firearms in the connections they form with other people.

Each person brings their salient images of gun use and other accompanying moral associations to their assessment of the legitimacy of gun ownership as a practice. In the case of the gun rights activists[1] I got to know in San Diego, the presence of firearms seems to engender a sense of security from threats, while also intensifying perceptions of fear. This fear motivates people to become involved in a political fight that has become a cornerstone of disagreements about American identity and belonging.

Human intentions and desires – whether mechanical, political, or even financial - have been stamped firmly onto guns. These intentions combine with what the gun is and what it can do to create and define new behaviours that would not be possible without the material object. I became caught in the powerful magnetic field that firearms create by seeking to explain their use. Learning to shoot taught me a great deal about what people do with guns and what guns do with people. However, I want to also look at how the kind of violence that is associated with guns cannot be explained as simply a result of high rates of firearm ownership. The reasons for cycles of violence as diverse as suicide, gang conflicts, mass shootings, and accidental deaths mean that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to gun related harm.

[1] I use the terms "***Gun Owners***", "***Shooters***", "***2nd Amendment Activists***", "***Gun Rights Activists***" interchangeably to refer to my interlocutors. At times I use them to refer to the national context, but this will be highlighted.

This thesis explores how a desire to own guns can be constituted within locally situated human lives in an attempt to explain why firearms have become such important objects of contestation in the United States. I spent a year conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Southern California with an organisation called the San Diego County Gun Owners. This political action committee holds monthly meetings, regular social events, fundraisers, and encourages direct campaigning. Arriving in the United States just two months prior to the 2016 general election, I found this group actively engaged in public debate and recruitment. Through this organisation I came to know many local gun owners who I accompanied to shooting ranges across the county, travelled with to defensive handgun courses or gun-rights conventions, and engaged in long conversations about why and how firearms have come to occupy such a central role in their lives.

My interlocutors were quick to emphasize the diversity of reasons they have for training with firearms. Some are hunters, others are hobbyists, some collect firearms, others occasionally take their weapons to the range or into the desert to shoot at targets. This thesis will focus primarily on self-defence shooters who conceive of their training as a serious effort to learn to protect themselves from threats to their lives that they see as always-immanent. This has become a cornerstone of national gun rights rhetoric, but these narratives also engage with the lived experience of threat that gun owners experience (Kohn 2004; Carlson 2014a; Springwood 2014).

This does not mean that the gun owners I spent time with do not have other reasons for owning guns. In fact, while I spent a lot of time at activist meetings and shooting courses where the political defence of gun ownership was framed as a fight of serious importance, the vast majority of my time was spent around gun owners as they *played* with guns. They took part in sports shooting matches, joked around, or enjoyed recounting the history of a gun that had been in their family since the Civil War. I account for how the serious business of learning to shoot enemies can exist within the same relational field as play and social connection. Gun owners reinforce community in shared experiences of firearm use.

The terms of a national debate about guns can come to feed into the subjective experiences people have with them. My interlocutors only started to articulate a sense of belonging to something called “gun culture” (Kohn 2004) when they felt that gun ownership was something

that was under threat. A perception that has been created within the framework of bipartisanship, a notion that American political thought is split down the middle into either Republican or Democrat – or by the broader terms of conservative and liberal. I recognised the kind of language my interlocutors used to talk about why they thought guns were forces for good from NRA convention speeches, *Fox News* pundits, and Republican candidate's manifestos. On the other hand, gun control activists I spent time with in San Diego also sounded like their left-leaning equivalents.

This thesis seeks to go beneath these linguistic expressions to focus instead on the emotional content and habitual, bodily habits that define a life spent arguing for or against gun ownership. The unique ways that people form connections with and through firearms can help us to explore questions of life and death, ethics, violence nationalism, gender, and embodiment. Gun culture looks different from the inside and it contains a diverse range of experiences and perspectives that allow me to look at how contemporary American political thought can link to personal beliefs about what it means to be human.

By linking a person centred focus with broader political and cultural analysis, I aim to acknowledge but go beyond the debate about whether some Americans should or should not own guns and instead investigate *why* my interlocutors want access to firearms and *how* a life can be built around defending the right to do so. I open up an analytical space for serious consideration of the lifestyles and beliefs of a group of people who helped to bring Donald Trump to power in 2016.

The discipline of anthropology has ingrained within me a tendency to believe that people have good reasons for doing what they do. That when one understands a cultural practice within its context and from the perspective of those who engage in it, a powerful space for empathy can open up. This thesis attempts to engage in the difficult task of humanizing a group of people who may not extend the same respect to their perceived enemies and opponents. I don't do this because I want you to like my informants, but because I think that representing complex emotional lives can give a better understanding of a key debate about political and national belonging at a moment when both are going through a period of turbulent change in the United States.

I have found that by placing myself in the shoes of people I did not feel comfortable empathising with, I have gained a better understanding of how conservative Americans think and found ways of bridging political divides with friendship. In trying to understand how some Americans form bonds with firearms, I realised that it was necessary to become aware of the personal biases that were informing the generosity of my analytical gaze. Without this awareness, the day to day realities of living around guns remained a black box to me - one that I filled with pre-emptive critique. For a while, this prevented me from actually hearing what my interlocutors were saying. For the duration of this thesis, I invite readers to step outside of the terms of the gun control debate and sit in the unsettling spaces in-between. A place where the conflict that defines so much political debate in the United States fades into the daily patterns of lives structured around the defence and use of firearms.

In this introduction I provide a map for my thesis by exploring the context of my fieldwork, the people I spent time with, and how I as an anthropologist and person inhabited gun owning spaces. I aim to give some context for my own struggles with both the method of anthropological enquiry and the social contexts that I moved between while in the United States. I also position my ethnographic and conceptual contribution within contemporary scholarly debates on gun ownership, gender, ethics, nationalism, and embodiment.

San Diego: America's 'Finest City'

The city of San Diego is a large urban sprawl made up of neighbourhoods that create a cluster of townships each with its own different kind of population, politics, and demography. San Diego County contains 3.3 million residents in 18 different cities over nearly 12,000 square kilometres. According to census data in 2018, 45.2% of the population was white, 34% were Hispanic, and under 20% were African American, Asian American, or "other" (US Census Bureau 2018).

I spent much of my fieldwork driving out to the remote parts of San Diego County, through hills, mountains, and deserts that look like they are still echoing with gun shots from old Hollywood spaghetti westerns. I ate at diners, called "Cindy's" and "Mamma Beth's". The tables occupied by men in red baseball caps that demand that America be made great again. Southern California is in many ways the 2016 election map in small scale. Just an hour's drive from the city of San Diego you might as well be in Texas.

The population of San Diego constructs their spatial understanding of the county by driving through it. Any effort to capture the natural environment must reference that twisting system of enormous six, seven, or eight lane freeways that connect the cities of Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Las Vegas to San Diego. These roads are badly maintained and often back up into long, polluting lines during the morning and evening rush hour. Highways branch off and snake through canyons and hills towards the smaller cities in the county. These are often more affordable areas and have large immigrant populations. It is in these cities that most of my informants lived.

Then smaller still, single-track roads lead to a variety of small rural towns. They are often an interesting ideological mix of conservative, liberal, and Libertarian, with economies supported by farms, sometimes for the newly legal marijuana trade. Finally, there are the significantly less affluent Indian Reservations, where a casino might provide the mainstay of the local economy because of less strict gambling laws – a double edged sword of sustenance and vice for Tribal occupants.

Social life in San Diego county is similarly built around the car. Upon meeting someone dialogue often begins with the conditions of traffic. Most of the events that I attended throughout my fieldwork took place at bars and restaurants rather than homes or free public spaces, making this research both expensive and time consuming even for short meetings. Everyone drives their own car to each event and leaves alone. The large distances covered to reach social engagements or meetings means that people regularly arrive late.

Is there any better symbol of the power of the individual than the car? Sealed off from the world it is easy to think that you are personally responsible for your speed, safety, and timings, even though the restraints of the heavy traffic and weather conditions of course factor in. The car itself, as an object, becomes invisible as it merges with the body, yet it fundamentally alters the way one perceives and understands one's place within an environment. If you wanted to get to a neighbourhood in the south of San Diego county from the north it would take half a day by bus, but might only take half an hour by car. Like cars, guns can alter human potential for action and behaviour. They become embedded in a social field of human affairs playing important roles as mediators of status, group belonging, and perceptions of danger.

Southern California represents a unique context in which to research gun ownership. Its history is characterised by a politics that ranges from liberal activism at the hubs of the University of California San Diego during the Civil Rights era and among Mexican-American labour organisations lead by Cesar Chavez, to its large military population and big business conservatives whose names ornament glitzy downtown hotels and boulevards (Davis and Miller 2003). California, as a state, is similarly defined by contradictions. Historian Curt Gentry (1968) suggests that California is "America tomorrow", experimenting with fashion, new industries, moral values, sexual norms and politics in advance of trends catching on elsewhere. It is a state defined by constant flux and as such it can be difficult to pin down a reliable definition of the region's politics, economy, or character.

While a large proportion of the population of San Diego comes from south of the US-Mexico border, Griswold del Castillo (2007) suggests that there is a cultural and political Anglo-American hegemony in the region. This is evidenced by the fact that until the late 1990s, there had never been an elected official of Mexican or Hispanic origin (2007: 5). However, both Native American and Mexican labour has been instrumental in the construction of San Diego's infrastructure and industry, from railroads to agriculture (2007: 96). San Diego's modern financial success is in large part due to the military industrial complex that arrived in the city in the run up to the Second World War (Davis and Miller 2003: 14). The industry that has sprung up around the military has created a "superpatriotic" ethos in San Diego, propped up by sympathetic politicians and private media companies. The constant stream of retiring navy and marine personnel has helped to boost real estate sales and has been a conservatizing force in the city. The second major industry in San Diego is tourism. Davis and Miller (2003) claim that San Diego urban planning has aimed to methodically convert the naturally stunning Southern California landscape into a controlled and packaged spectacle. History is drained from older neighbourhoods, sanitised and re-presented as tourist attraction.

With 16 shooting ranges throughout the city, bi-monthly gun shows and a thriving "Wild West" re-enactment scene, San Diego provided multiple locations to carry out participant observation and to meet gun owning families. While Davis and Miller (2003) have suggested that history has been eradicated from San Diego's neighbourhoods, as I will show, gun owners often attach great historical significance to the natural landscapes in which they train themselves to shoot. Firearms are one way that some San Diegan's find an attachment to the land, allowing them to

participate in particular interpretations of history. However, the gun rights activists I spent time with predominantly own firearms for the purposes of self-defence. Their arguments are framed in existential terms and they seek out training as methods of keeping themselves, their families, and their nation safe. Many of my interlocutors also carried their weapons concealed beneath clothing. This practice allows them to move through public spaces while armed, which will be a key aspect of both the ethnographic description in this thesis, as well as the analysis which centres around how wielding a gun changes one's perception of the world.

Much of my fieldwork was spent carrying out appointment ethnography, moving between public spaces and reliant on invites to events or to the homes of my interlocutors. I was not able to live with gun owners and instead rented a room in the city outside of my research context. This style of ethnographic research has its drawbacks as I spent less time with informants than I would have liked and was unable to observe their day to day routines with firearms. However, given that gun ownership itself is a kind of "appointment" based practise, finding its locus at gun rights activist meetings, weekly visits to the range, longer trips to shooting courses, and occasional maintenance at home, my engagement in many ways mirrors my informant's own interactions with guns.

The Gunscape

Gun ownership in America is tied to a long history of white supremacy. The founding fathers placed strict legal conditions around who could own a gun, prohibiting slaves, freed black people, and white men who did not pledge their loyalty to the new republic from possession (Winkler 2011). They also kept regularly updated public registers of who owned what firearms and inspected them to ensure their safe function. Following the American Civil War, despite the abolition of slavery, the South re-established white supremacy with a series of laws that restricted the movement, rights, and relative value of black lives. This included a ban on African-Americans owning firearms.

While one might look at the history of the National Rifle Association or other right-wing organisations to explain the contemporary terms and slogans of the gun rights debate, it is also necessary to understand the role that the Black Panther Party played in defining an emerging discourse around the use of firearms for self-defence (Winkler 2011; Bloom & Waldo 2016;

Spender 2016). Founders of the movement, Huey P Newton and Bobby Seale, originally named themselves the Black Panther Party for Self-Defence, emphasizing the importance of guns as tools for black Americans to resist unequal enforcement of the law and the frequent violence that is still used to police African-American communities. In an era in which Civil Rights leaders like Malcom X and Martin Luther King Jr were bring assassinated, the founders of the Black Panthers recognised that black people were always going to come up against a well-armed and organised police force that would not protect their lives or property.

The party began to organise armed counter-police patrols to ensure that interactions between officers and black people remained peaceful. Well versed in the law, Huey P Newton drew his justifications for carrying guns from the Second Amendment, telling one police officer:

> Don't you know you don't remove nobody's property without due process of law . . . here you are ready to violate my constitutional rights. You can't have my gun. The only way you're gonna get it from me is to try to take it. (quoted in Bloom and Waldo 2016, p47)

His final challenge for the police officer to take his gun almost sounds like a famous statement by former president of the NRA Charlton Heston who thirty years later said that the government would have to take his rifle from his "cold dead hands". Newton also described his gun as "the basic tool of liberation", echoing many of the statements my interlocutors made about feeling a sense of freedom and safety while carrying a firearm.

When armed members of the Black Panther Party stormed into the California state capitol building in Sacramento in 1967, they argued that the Civil Rights Act had not solved anything for black people in America and that armed resistance and revolution were key to freedom from a federal government that consistently dominated and disrespected black lives. Following this incident, Don Mulford, a Republican state assemblyman proposed a gun control law that would restrict the right to bear arms in California cities, thus effectively ending Black Panther patrols. Then California Governor and future darling of the National Rifle Association, Ronald Regan backed The Mulford Bill stating emphatically that "guns are a ridiculous way to solve problems" (quoted in Winkler 2011).

There are in fact some striking similarities between the rhetoric of the Black Panther Party and contemporary gun rights organisations. Both suggest that firearms are the ultimate tool of defence against a tyrannical government and from random attacks on the street from dangerous strangers, whether they be police or other citizens. The Panthers formed militia like units to "police the police", drawing their justification from the Second Amendment and thus positioned black people as acting

within the social contract of the United States (Bloom and Waldo 2016). The gun owners I knew trained together with the ultimate aim of resisting a more powerful enemy and pointed to the Bill of Rights for legal precedent.

Both the founding members of the Panthers and people like Michael Schwartz from San Diego County Gun Owners have a savvy knowledge of the law that can be used to argue against a representative of the state when they overstep their boundaries legally. And finally, both the organisations I studied and the Panthers started their movements by recruiting men, largely drawing on heteronormative associations between masculinity and protective violence. Yet, both have also shifted to accommodate women and non-binary Americans who subscribed to a version of femininity that includes within it a competence with wielding fire power in protection of their community.

Native Americans have also reached for firearms to resist state oppression. The American Indian Movement (AIM) raised awareness of state oppression of Native Americans in high profile acts of resistance (Smith and Warrior 1996). During the Occupation of Wounded Knee in 1973, a collected group of AIM activists and local Lakota Indians armed with rifles fought back against an illegal three-month siege by the US military until eventually the protest was disbanded and the leaders arrested (Camp 2020). These events serve as a warning that the US government is willing to ignore Constitutional restraints on using the military against its own people in particular circumstances. However, AIM recognised that only by picking up firearms and by embedding themselves in the historically significant site of Wounded Knee could they achieve national recognition of their plight (Smith and Warrior 1996: 202).

Since the Black Panther Party triggered renewed national controversy about gun ownership, several attempts have been made to restrict access to firearms for private citizens. Laws like The Gun Control Act of 1968 were usually proposed in response to particularly violent moments or overwhelming popular support; for example, following the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr and John F Kennedy. More recently, and in the wake of a spate of mass shootings, President Obama tried to bypass Congress with an executive order that requires the safe storage of firearms, increases funding for research into gun safety technology, demands that gun dealers receive proper licensing and makes background checks compulsory before the sale of weapons (Whitehouse.Gov 2016). This was quickly overturned by President Donald Trump.

Despite the fact that many Americans, including the majority of gun owners, support stricter firearms legislation, lobby groups such as the NRA have been largely successful in preventing any meaningful or wide spread federal gun laws from being implemented (Hemenway 2006). There are virtually no national product safety requirements for guns and the US still has no national requirements for training, licensing, registration, or safe storage. There is also a congressional ban on funding for any Centre for Disease Control (CDC) research on the impact of gun violence in American society (Hemenway 2006; 211).

In contrast, laws in individual states are more variable and California has a relatively large number of gun laws. Despite this, Kohn (2004) notes that gun owners in San Francisco are not required to take classes to purchase a firearm. Potential buyers must take *The Basic Firearms Safety Test* which is supposed to demonstrate their knowledge of gun safety, yet no physical demonstration that they can handle a firearm is required. Unlike in some other states, private sales of firearms must take place through a licensed dealer and the owner must register the gun with the state of California (Brown 2007). However, the enforcement of these laws is patchy at best. Despite a reputation as a liberal state, California and particularly San Diego has a strong conservative presence, anti-gun and pro-gun activists often rub shoulders as politicians seek to ban popular gun shows in the state and enact a variety of long gun (rifles, assault weapons) bans (Kohn 2004: 6). The clash between gun owners and anti-gun activists in California throws into stark relief the world of gun ownership and creates a public space of conflict that I found reflected in the way that gun owners talked about firearms privately (Anderson 2015).

The founder of San Diego County Gun Owners, Michael Schwartz, characterises his organisation as one made up of average, working class Americans, but an internal survey carried out in 2017 suggests that the majority of his members earn well above the national average income. It found that 77% of its members are over forty and 85% of them are male and that more than 50% of their base earn over $100,000 a year, with just 12% bringing home an annual income of under $50,000. While gun rights activist meetings were, on the whole, white, male spaces, they were also attended by diverse communities in San Diego.

San Diego is a city famous for its historical tolerance and celebration of non-normative expressions of gender identity and sexuality. This is reflected in the demographics that I encountered in gun owning groups. Although the vast majority of gun rights activists that I met tended to be heterosexual, white men and women, a pro-LGBTQ+ firearms advocacy group

called the Pink Pistols also adds a more diverse voice to this research. This group was made up of people who express a range of non-heteronormative gender identities and sexualities. I became close with Joan, a board member of the organisation and transgender woman in her 60s. She is also a leading member of the Pink Pistols. Through this group I got to know a number of transgender women and men who fiercely defend the right to own guns on the grounds that they belong to a demographic which is disproportionately physically assaulted.

This non-normative engagement with and conceptualisation of firearm use once again challenged many of my assumptions about what a gun owner looks like and how they think. However, their complaints about California's legislative priorities sounded remarkably similar to my traditionally conservative interlocutors who disliked that the state leans towards stricter gun control laws and has a welcoming attitude to immigration that has created sanctuary cities for those fleeing war and oppression from around the world.

I found that women were generally less likely than men or transgender gun owners to agree to interviews and they tended to avoid me. There might be a number of different ways of understanding this. The simplest and most likely explanation is that they did not feel comfortable meeting a male researcher one on one for interviews. However, Wendy, a young Thai-American woman and employee of the SDCGO told me that she didn't think that she would be able to answer my questions adequately because, "I'm just a normal gun owner". Despite my reassurances that this was exactly the kind of person that I was interested in talking to, she still refused an interview. However, I was able to get to know a number of women who run all-female shooting courses and social events. They claim that the defensive powers that guns have can protect them from dangerous men.

I also spent some time with a local chapter of a gun control organisation while in San Diego. This was partly motivated by the desire for more engagement with my field and partly by an interest in seeing how the main subjects of my research – gun owners – are conceptualised and engaged by their opponents. While I found many differences between this group and the San Diego County Gun Owners, their way of arguing against gun ownership strictly followed the terms of the national gun control debate. This closed down opportunities for both groups to work together on solutions to gun violence that I found they often agreed on – encouraging the safe storage of firearms, background checks on all gun purchases, and harsher punishments for breaking current firearms regulations.

Many of my gun owning interlocutors served time in the military and the Navy's Pacific fleet is parked in San Diego's scenic downtown harbour. This brings a strong conservative influence to a city that has a balanced division of political power between Democrats and Republicans in county, state, and national legislatures. As one professional sports shooter told me:

> The biggest misconception is that California is anti-gun. California politicians are anti-gun. Studies show that we have as many as 33 million guns in California out of a population of 38 million. California has the most United States Practical Shooting Association shooters with 2400 members, 26% higher than Texas. California is very pro-gun.

In fact, California as a whole ranks second in the nation for the total number of firearms owned by civilians, beaten only by Texas (White 2019). This might be partially explained by the density of the state's population, but is indicative of the saturation of firearms in American society that goes beyond simple assumptions that divide liberal coasts from a conservative rural interior.

Negotiating a Position

When I first met Michael Schwartz, the Executive director of the San Diego County Gun Owners, I found it challenging to succinctly describe my research goals and also what I would do with my data. On the one hand, I constructed a narrative to reflect my genuine desire to understand what goes into a life oriented around guns. On the other, I half knowingly tailored it to what I knew Michael would be able to hear. I found myself using words like "unbiased", "objective", and "balanced" – terms that felt rusty from their confinement in a post-colonial prison of concepts that falsely construct an all knowing, positivist analytical gaze (Clifford & Marcus 1986).

Fortunately, Michael seemed to trust me and in particular he approved of my participatory methodology that emphasised the importance of learning how to shoot. I started to attend San Diego County Gun Owners member's meetings and social events, making connections with other gun owners. I watched as Michael's initial ambivalence became an accepting and partially humorous tolerance of my presence. When introducing me to other members of the organisation he would say, "I don't know what Joe is going to write about us, but I figure, we

are the good guys. We've got nothing to hide". Over the course of two years of on-going communication, Michael and I have developed an easy relationship that acknowledges our differences while maintaining a sense of mutual respect that has led us into conversations about how best to prevent gun violence on multiple occasions. This has allowed us to find points of commonality about how to safely regulate firearms and prevent the kinds of violence associated with their use.

In a return fieldtrip to San Diego in November of 2018, Michael and I sat down to talk about potential research outputs from my project and he said that he was "looking forward to the book". I realised that he may have had another motivation for facilitating my research – a hope that a published book about his organisation might lend legitimacy and authority to its existence. Despite my attempts to manage his expectations about the scope of readership for a PhD in anthropology, he continues to message me to ask when "the book" is coming out. This knowledge has helped to guide the tone of my writing. I try to strike a balance between generosity and critique in my interpretations of what my interlocutors have told me that brings into the foreground how my own perspective on firearms shifted throughout my fieldwork.

The gun owning groups that I moved within were generally welcoming spaces. However, my initial attempts to gain access left me feeling there was some suspicion about my presence. I came from a world that they saw as liberal (European and academic). In asking them explicit questions about gun ownership I got the sense that some people felt I was stepping into private territory. One man I spoke to at a gun show accused me of being a federal agent after I asked whether he had bought anything that day. These sceptical individuals would avoid engaging me in conversation to the point of rudeness. Despite coming to know many gun owners well this gave me a pervasive sense of exclusion when in group contexts.

Others simply saw me as an interested outsider and I sensed that they were sure they could convert me to their point of view. Discussions and interviews would sometimes turn into debates which I encouraged so that I could delve deeper into what lay behind their own sense of why they needed to be able to defend themselves and why it was important for them to convince me of their points. It is worth considering that by simply being a white, relatively young middle-class man from Scotland, I had several advantages in accessing this field.

My interlocutors particularly enjoyed that I come from Scotland. I often heard dialogue from the movie *Braveheart* repeated to me as a greeting. In William Wallace, and in Scotland more generally, gun owners saw an ally in the loosely-defined but all-pervasive rhetoric of freedom and liberty. I did not challenge these implicit associations as they seemed to be endearing qualities to gun owners. It allowed me to build rapport from the moment they noticed my accent and often triggered conversations about their Scottish (or Irish) heritage. I was marked as safe by a national identity that many of them seemed to hold in a mythical, fantasy-scape of imagined ancestral origins.

My belonging in an unmarked racial category also worked in my favour as I tried to integrate myself into gun owning spaces. As Abigail Kohn (2004) has said of gun owners in Northern California, it is not that gun owners are necessarily hostile to non-whites, but the spaces and communities within which the practices of shooting and gun rights activism take place are predominantly made up of Americans who might identify as white. Many of my interlocutors seemed to think of race as something that they do not possess. Instead, race is seen as something reserved for minority groups and is evoked in stories of violence in non-white communities (Hartigan Jr 1997). My whiteness gave me an invisibility that an anthropologist of colour would not have had. This thesis will trace some of the ways that whiteness as a racial category is constituted through processes of othering and concealment (Baldwin 1995; Hartigan 1997).

Gun rights groups are often led and largely populated by a white, heteronormative mainstream (King 2007) and while I will explore the ways that gun owners perpetuate and reinforce hegemonic power structures and identities, I also want to understand how they are being challenged by non-normative groups of gun owners – particularly through the perspectives of my female and transgender interlocutors. I expand on the ethnographic literature on gun ownership by exploring how the Pink Pistols, a pro-LGBTQ+ firearms activist group, is being integrated into the more traditional gun rights community of SDCGO. Transgender women in leadership positions of these organisations were among the most receptive and welcoming of my presence. They were eager to have their voices heard and saw me as an ally with some degree of power to represent their experiences. This was particularly urgent as they saw themselves as sitting in precarious positions as gun owners within a predominantly liberal LGBTQ+ community and as transgender women within a conservative gun owning community. This shows how transgender shooters both reproduce and challenge binary assumptions about the links between gender, self-defence, strength, and violence. It is also an

attempt to understand how unmarked gendered and racial identities are constructed in dialogue with marked others.

Age and experience also played a role in my access to gun owners. I was 27 at the time of my fieldwork and I sensed that many of the older white men that I spent time with found my questions flattering. The interest that I showed in their views on contemporary politics, on the value of gun ownership, and their understanding of their role as protectors of society opened a rare opportunity for reflection and self-analysis that I realised they valued. I think that at times I also challenged their ideas of what a "liberal academic" is like. Some started asking me questions about what life within a university is like and this opened a space for productive conversations about diverse issues such as political correctness, cultural relativism and bias in teaching.

My age and relative ignorance of technical details about guns allowed me take on the position of novice. The value of taking an "apprentice" position has been noted by ethnographers (Stoller 1987; 1989: Wacquant 1995; 2004: Wall and Stasz 2010), who suggest that one's inexperience of a subject or practice acts as an invitation to our interlocutors to explain and demonstrate. One component of the novice position is an openness to learning key skills that are important to our informants (Wacquant 1995). Sensing that participation would be important in accessing gun owning spaces, I emphasized that I wanted to understand what it was like to actually develop the skills of shooting. I realised that many of the relationships that I built with gun owners were forming around an apprentice-expert dynamic as they took on the job of teaching me to shoot. My acknowledgment of their authority to do so seemed to be a necessary component of their willingness to instruct me.

"Experts" are highly valued among gun owners (Springwood 2007). Shooting instructors, members of the military, police officers, conservative lawyers, and highly skilled civilians shooters have become celebrities within the San Diego County Gun Owners community. They appeared in their promotional videos and spoke at meetings or celebrations about why preserving the right to bear arms for self-defence is so important, evoking their experiences with danger and violence as confirmation of their authority.

Ethnographers can learn about the material world by engaging in the activities within which it takes on meaning and action, "sawing logs, building a wall, knapping a stone" (Ingold 2007:

3) and, one presumes, shooting a gun. The meanings that objects take on and reproduce arise in relation to a current of materials, social dynamics, and their larger embedded cultural life. They are active participants in a world in formation. By acknowledging the expert status of my interlocutors I was able to ask simple questions about gun ownership and the practices of shooting. As my shooting skills improved throughout the year, members of the organisation who had remained sceptical about my presence were more likely to engage me in conversations and answer questions when asked. Learning to shoot seemed to be one (slow) way of labelling myself as trustworthy.

A National Conversation

I developed a stunned fascination with gun ownership the first time that I encountered it. In 2013 I took part in an undergraduate exchange programme at the University of California San Diego and rented a room from a couple in a nearby neighbourhood. It turned out that they owned several guns. Another lodger kept a loaded firearm next to his bed. He told me that this should make me feel safe, but my liberal, middle-class, Scottish upbringing meant that I could not shake the association between guns, death, and oppression. With news reports of mass shootings playing through my head, I struggled to include gun ownership within my understanding of how "good" people should live and the evenings I spent in conversation with my hosts challenged many of my preconceptions while reaffirming others.

I felt a curiosity about this topic and began to see that the image I had of gun owners was constructed from a particularly British set of stereotypes. These experiences forced me to critically examine my assumptions about gun owners. I realised that I had "othered" a group of people based on a way of life that I had, until now, no intention of understanding: an admission that sits uncomfortably with the part of me that still fears and dislikes firearms. Yet, living with gun owners confronted me with the complexity of a life oriented around firearms. The way that guns can become bound up with a sense of civic duty, existential safety, and familial obligation (Anderson 2015). From this experience I developed a proposal for a PhD project that would take me back to San Diego to conduct a longer and more intentional ethnographic study of the subject.

When I returned to California in 2016/2017, my experience quickly become one of dislocation from and between worlds. My friends in the predominantly liberal environment of the University of California San Diego seemed to mirror all of the qualities that defined the predominantly right wing ideological spaces that gun owners inhabit. Each was distinctly American in its own right, yet these competing worlds only met in moments of local political conflict – the town hall meeting, the city council chamber, and activist events. I noticed that this conflict and antagonism actually unite these groups. Othering and dehumanisation of political opponents might be characteristic of the contemporary political moment in the United States, yet it serves the productive role of constituting strong inter-group identities by providing a mirror in which one can see how *not* to be. This creates communities of *mutual distaste*[2], bonded together by their dislike of others who do not think like them.

The more time that I spent with gun owners, the more I realised that this group of people can act as a window into deeper anxieties and beliefs about what it means to be human in modern America. The contemporary debate over the place of guns in American civil life is essentially a disagreement about whether the world is fundamentally friendly or dangerous; whether fellow citizens should be trusted or feared. It raises questions about criminality (is violence inherent or can it be explained sociologically? Do evil people exist?), free will (do guns or people kill people?), and mortality (how likely am I to die violently and how should I prepare for such an event?). Gun ownership is also a conversation about who can legitimately wield violence, where sovereignty lies (or should lie) in a republic, what kind of people belong in America, and what it means to inhabit particular gendered roles. Each side offers a critique of ways of conceptualising how life should be lived in the United States: is a moralising discourse that puts forward a vision of the nation and ethical citizenship.

Gun ownership is a *key hole* issue (Hochschild 2016) that can open up wider discussions about identity and belonging. Whether a household contained firearms predicted which way a person would vote in the 2016 general election more accurately than any other demographic marker (Cohn and Quealy 2017). Movements that form locally around national debates can provide spaces for theorizing about national contexts (Ginsburg 1989). As well as producing conflict and alienation between people who align with different groups, this national debate also provides opportunities for world building. I am interested in how a conservative social

[2] An idea discussed by Brene Brown when she appeared in a January 2020 edition of the podcast On Being

movement creates a set of assumptions about the world, or *Doxa* (Bourdieu 1977), and how this resonates with wider political rhetoric. This creates a feedback loop that generates interpretations of subjective experience. These interpretations are then placed into a taken-for-granted way of being shared between members of a closed group who think the same way.

The practices of learning to shoot for the purposes of self-defence also necessarily raises the question of ethics and sovereignty. Who deserves to be shot? Who should be granted the power over life and death? Is a state monopoly on violence an effective and fair way to run a nation? Who is a "good guy" and who is a "bad guy"? Linking a phenomenological approach to the study of ethics and nationalism brings a new perspective to the practises of nation building and belonging.

Charles Springwood (2007) argues that what has been missing from work on gun ownership within the social sciences is an in-depth look at the complex ways in which people come to live in close contact with firearms. Ethnographic work that has looked at violence in communities across America (Bourgois 1996; Wacquant 2004; Ralph 2014) in many ways ignores the instrument by which that violence is perpetrated. This thesis attempts to address this absence by investigating how a group of Americans have created a life oriented around defending the right to own guns. I show how their materiality plays an important role in how they accrue meaning. While people and history inscribe firearms with symbolic weight (Stewart 1996), guns themselves can speak back, and in very physical ways. Guns reflect the humanity of their wielders through the prism of an object dense with symbolic associations with violence, masculinity, racial identity, and social privilege. My work builds on previous studies by taking the object as a kind of interlocutor with its own social, political, and bodily affect.

Anthropologists and Guns

Although many scholars have indirectly studied the practice of gun use among white Americans (Mead 1965 [1942]; Latour 1994; Stewart 1996; Song 2010; Shapira 2013; Hochschild 2016), ethnographic work with gun owners is limited (Kohn 2004; Doukas 2012; Springwood 2014). In Charles Springwood's edited volume of essays *Open Fire*, anthropologists, sociologists, and media studies scholars come together to explore global gun cultures. Springwood writes that "guns are at once a contested object of community preoccupation, a commodity and object of both fear and desire" (2007: 16). They can represent

or symbolise power relations locally and internationally - for instance, President George W. Bush famously placed Sadam Hussein's personal firearm in the Oval Office following the fall of Baghdad. Guns are qualitatively unique objects that become inscribed with significance over time (Springwood 2007).

Springwood emphasizes that it is their murderous potential that explains why firearms can take on such important roles in a culture or a person's life. Across the diverse reasons that gun owners have for engaging with their weapons, what remains consistent is the enchantment of the individual by the machine itself (Springwood 2014; Saramafir 2017). Guns make meaning in a number of different ways. Their use is situated within historical or mythical narratives. As symbols they can take on many of the qualities that weapons have held in mythologies from around the world. Throughout this thesis I show how my interlocutors talk of the protection that firearms can give them as if they were magical objects capable of combatting evil and promoting good, comparable to mythological weapons like King Arthur's sword *Excalibur*.

The anthropological literature suggests that guns and gun culture are strongly associated with men (Kohn 2004; King 2007; Springwood 2007). Its practices could be seen as perpetuating hegemonic gendered and racial ideologies by locating the physical means to dominate in the hands of predominantly white, male Americans (Connel 2005; O'Neill 2007; Melzer 2009). Others have looked at the relationship between gun ownership and white masculine identities, claiming that this can legitimize the exercise of violence against non-white Americans on the grounds of self-defence or law and order (Young 1989; Burbick 2006; Stroud 2012).

Stange and Oyster (2000) suggest that guns act as symbols of masculine power that locate both the sense of superiority and physical means of violence in a material object. This gun-given potency maintains binary gendered ideologies that associated male bodies with strength, safety, and violence, and female bodies with vulnerability and weakness (Carlson 2014a). Mythical interpretations of American history are central to the practice of Cowboy Action Shooting in Northern California (Kohn 2004). This re-enactment sport allows shooters to take on the personae of Wild West cowboys from the frontier era and dramatize "myths" that stress a self-reliance, individualism, and skill with a gun that permeate modern American gun culture but also wider media (2004: 43). Similarly, my interlocutors linked this mythic past to contemporary notions of self-defence in the home in which the gun provides men with the

means of fulfilling a gendered role by protecting his family and property from imagined aggressors (Springwood 2014: 460).

I found that my interlocutors often look for historical continuity between the modern gun rights movement and mythical figures from America's past (Kohn 2004; Springwood 2007; Cox 2007). Founding fathers like Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin are positioned next to the violent cowboys of the frontier as strong men who wielded violence appropriately to repel threats to the United States. This converts a history of slavery and genocide into one of heroes defeating "bad guys"; of civilisation conquering savagery (Slotkin 1973; White & Limerick 1994; Mennel 2007). Merging contemporary gun ownership with a historical consciousness creates a sense of continuity with the past that cements belonging within a particular interpretation of a national imagined community (Anderson 1983).

Importantly, these mythical heroes provide contemporary gun owning men with role models to emulate and admire. They provide a "normative masculinity" (Connell 1995) that valorises qualities like courage, discipline, competitiveness, strength, independence, and violence (Nagel 1998: 245). Establishing that one is a "good guy" and therefore worthy of defending women and other "innocents" is key to my male informant's sense of purpose in life: one that sees violence as a civic duty in extreme circumstances of threat (Slotkin 1973; Shapira 2013). This makes the pursuit of firearms ownership and training an aspect of being a good citizen - and in some cases with being a good man. Shapira (2013) suggests that wielding firearms is one way of acting out an embodied drama of patriotism that gives meaning and structure to men's lives – especially those with a history of military service. They form bonds with men from similar backgrounds and gain a sense of political agency in the process. Their gun use is tied to their interpretation of citizenship and national belonging, but also their racial identity.

The gun owners that I got to know provide a window into how groups of predominantly white Americans construct their identity around specific racial experiences. Empirical explorations of how whiteness is made real can help to deconstruct and understand social privilege (Crapanzano 1985). Central to this project should be a focus on perceptions of "pathos, terror, guilt, the joy of power and acquisition, the weight of responsibility and the resentment of such responsibility, feelings of solitude, mis-understanding, [and] un-understanding" (1985: 23). "Whiteness" then is a cultural phenomenon that can be studied in local contexts so that the way in which it operates can be better understood.

My interlocutors also insisted that carrying a gun is a positive thing that women can do to protect themselves. Gun owners from all demographics of my research spoke of firearms as tools of "female empowerment", occasionally using the phrase "gun rights are women's rights". While guns do act as masculine symbols of power, female shooters engage creatively with this trope to define their own notions of strength and autonomy (Kohn 2004). Transgender and female gun owners take on the roles of protective mothers, wives, friends, community leaders, and citizens, inhabiting many of the same qualities that men see themselves as possessing and challenging taken for granted associations between masculinity and guns. In doing so they inhabit a salient historical role of the "armed women" (Browder 2008). At times imagined as fierce hunters of native Americans (Cutter et al. 2008), at others as defenders of the home and nation, this always-white woman is moulded in the image of a masculine "good guy".

I want to acknowledge, the seemingly intrinsic connection between guns and masculine tropes without falling into the trap of using this as a causal explanation. Masculinity is an internally complex category with an historical depth and contemporary make-up that is neither simply hegemonically constructed by men, nor exclusive of non-male perspectives. Masculinity, femininity, and other gendered identities exist in a relational field and form stabilising aspects of a coherent sense of self that are always being contested (Connell 1995: 71).

I expand on existing work on gun ownership in the United States by focusing on how dominant interpretations of national belonging, gender, race, and even class are embodied and remade through the practices that accompany defensive gun use. I show how myths come to life in performative shooting events and political activism that creates a meaningful engagement with a past and imagined future for the self and nation. I aim to take account of how multiple aspects of self-identification are produced in dialogue with a material object dense with symbolic associations with violence and death.

Technologies of Fear

Joan is terrified.

She clutches her handbag to her hip and walks quickly past rows of human bodies slumped against the walls that line a broad street in Los Angeles. For Joan the tents and cardboard boxes that litter the pavements serve as evidence of degeneracy, desperation, and danger. A man pushing a shopping trolley reaches out a hand and asks her something, but she cannot (or will not) hear him - perceiving only threat in his attempt to communicate.

Joan's usually calm demeanour and trained situational awareness is absent as she hurries past the homeless population of Skid Row trying to ignore her mounting fears. Sensing the creeping onset of a panic attack, she dives into an empty doorway to collect herself. She takes a moment to breathe deeply, trying to control her pounding heart. Her hand grips tightly onto the black handbag that hangs over her dress, as if finding comfort in its presence. With her breath moving at a steadier pace, she places one foot in front of the other and pushes through the physically constricting fear that seems to paralyse her.

* * *

Joan told me this story while we ate huge portions of eggs, bacon, and sausages at her favourite diner in her rural hometown in San Diego county. The restaurant is decorated like a hunting lodge, deer and elk leer from the rafters with bulging eyes. Two television screens are mounted on the wall opposite the table where Joan and I sit. One plays a short montage of patriotic imagery – the stars and stripes blowing in the wind, a row of soldiers saluting, and footage of sweeping desert vistas, forests, and snow-capped mountains that show off the natural beauty of the United States. The other is tuned to *Fox News*. Today the main story is that Donald Trump has signed an executive order pulling the United States out of the Paris Climate Accords. Joan notices me glancing at the screen and we exchange a look that acknowledges our differences of opinion while recognising that neither of us wants to get into a debate this morning. A middle-aged waitress dispels this momentary potential for disagreement by asking me, "more coffee hun?"

Returning to her story, Joan tells me that she would normally avoid the dark streets of inner-city Los Angeles, but she was booked to talk at a Republican fundraising event about the benefits of arming in self-defence – particularly as a transgender woman. While Joan often explicitly emphasized that she is not a "victim", she believes that her gender presentation means that she is at a greater risk of being physically assaulted than many of her fellow citizens. She has trained with firearms her whole life, but since her transition to living full time as a woman

has said that she now sees guns primarily as tools to defend her life against discrimination and abuse.

When she told me about her fear of being attacked on Skid Row, I knew that the reference to her handbag was significant. She keeps a compact handgun in this bag wherever she goes, saying that it brings her a sense of safety when she feels in danger. On this occasion she had left her gun at home because she was attending an event in a public building where it is illegal to carry firearms. The vivid sensory and emotional style in which Joan described her perceptions of threat highlights how carrying a firearm can become an integral aspect of a gun owner's embodied way of "being in the world" (Csordas 1994) – it's absence induces a panic attack. But it also highlights how she relates her perceptions of her environment to socially, politically, and historically charged notions of national threat.

As Joan spoke of her experience of fear, I am transported from the white, affluent, rural and suburban spaces that my informants inhabit, to a different image of America - one defined by urbanization, poverty, and ethnic-racial difference. Joan seems to have a physiological reaction to being in these spaces. She takes for granted the inhumanity of the people she might encounter there and cannot include this experience of America within her own understanding of how one *should* be American. The homeless people in Joan's story become inhuman monsters, lurking on a dark street. They are place holders for the ill-intentions that she imagines exist in the human heart. Without the presence of her firearm she cannot afford to think of these people as human. In case she has to see them as enemies, she labels them as such in advance. Their location (inner-city Los Angeles), their poverty, and their non-whiteness means that they can only ever be potential "bad guys" (Hartigan Jr 1997).

Whiteness is a category of experience that makes itself real through experience. Its ongoing historical position of domination orientates white bodies in space and allows them to take on particular behaviours that non-white Americans cannot (Ahmed 2007). When Joan carries a firearm to ward off potential attack in Los Angeles, she shows that this is an aspect of citizenship that is available to her, but both armed and unarmed black men and women are treated as if they were dangerous simply for existing within the United States.

To inhabit and claim to belong in America as a white person is to assert a belonging over the land (Hage 1998). Whiteness, Hage has said (1998), operates by a kind of spatial power. Both

supporters of multi-culturalism and white nationalists assert an ownership over national space within a debate about whether "they" (immigrants, refugees, or even non-white citizens) are welcome "here" or not (1998: 17). These arguments assume that "whiteness" makes one the arbiter of national space.

Who belongs *safely* within the nation depends on one's ethno-racial assignment (1998: 3), which in turn impacts on the kind of behaviours that one can legitimately exhibit. Racial social geography (Frankenberg 1993) defines the way in which the landscape opens or closes to particular people based on their assigned ethno-racial categorisation. In this geography, how much one belongs takes on a relational character where, for example, Jews are white in relation to African-Americans, but "less white" in relation to Anglo-Americans (Brodkin 1998). Whiteness is never complete and one can stake claims to belonging within its privilege through certain "whitenening" behaviours and attitudes that can conceal yet never quite eradicate non-whiteness (Brodkin 1998).

The relative comfort of moving through space shows the way in which racism does not just linger in attitudes and beliefs, but instead finds a deeper location in the body through action and habit (Ahmed 2007). It is not that Joan consciously articulates a belief that the people on this dark street in Los Angeles are inherently dangerous because of their skin colour, rather she was raised within a society and engages in a type of activity (defensive shooting) that firmly associates her chances of encountering violence and threat with non-white bodies. Joan then, responds to this embodied disposition by cultivating behaviours that rest on the assumption of non-white threat. She is active in the reproduction of historical-racial divisions rather than a passive recipient of intergenerational attitudes (Roediger 1991).

As the history of the Black Panther Party and contemporary brutality against African-Americans by the police show, black people with guns are seen as a threat to national order even when they draw their legal precedent from the Second Amendment. The sight of armed black men in 1970s Oakland triggered wide sweeping legislation to prevent firearms from being carried in California cities (Spencer 2016). Protests by armed white people on the contrary are often accompanied by calls to liberalise gun laws. This fundamentally de-legitimises black people's claims to be operating within the social contract when protesting unequal treatment: the associations between violence and non-white neighbourhoods creates a conception of national space that dehumanises those who live within them. This creates a racial

panic that motivates Joan's desire to carry firearms, particularly when in areas defined by ethno-racial difference.

This tendency towards dehumanization induces such fear in Joan that she has to pause so that she doesn't freeze. The breathing techniques that she employs are taught at shooting courses that I attended with her throughout my fieldwork. They are designed to put the gun wielder in touch with the way that perceptions of fear can quickly escalate into panic. These precise physiological descriptions of threat can contribute towards its management. In both their presence and absence, guns produce novel physiological states in gun owners who carry them for self-defence. As Springwood has said, firearms merge with the body, transforming the boundaries around which the self is constituted, "the gun becomes what one is, not what one has" (Springwood 2007: 22). This creates a kind of subjective hybridity that informs broader perceptual schema for interpreting how one understands the likelihood of being violently assaulted.

In his work with Hezbollah militants, Saramifar (2017) suggests that the AK47 they wield become extensions of embodied experience. The close intimacy that one achieves through learning to shoot a gun brings the object into a way of perceiving and attributing meaning to the world. These militants are "enchanted" by their weapons. For my interlocutors, firearms can take on magical qualities that confer spells of protection, potency, and status onto their wielders, yet they also engage with these objects concretely in their day to day lives by shooting or carrying them. The body can serve as a useful location to observe how guns are made meaningful in semiotic and material expressions in human contexts (Springwood 2007: 22).

Around six months in to my fieldwork I was able to borrow a gun from an informant. Bringing a firearm into my personal space triggered new and greater fears. In ethnographic research that mainly involved fitting around the day to day routines of gun owners, for the first time the field had come home with me in a very tangible sense. Despite its secure location in a locked draw, the gun seemed to have a particularly heavy presence in my room where my lamp, for example, did not. I felt a hot, buzzing sense of danger emanating from the object, which further intensified my perceptions of fear. It is in the detailed awareness of bodily states of fear that gun owners find evidence of their need for defensive technology.

Carrying a gun in public creates a physiological awareness of the body that can project threat onto perceptions of the everyday. In the embodied experience of perceiving a threat, gun owners bring a conditioned bodily knowledge of shooting into dialogue with particular ideological dispositions. These dispositions presence a national history that emphasizes anxieties about personal safety that are perpetuated in contemporary political rhetoric, conservative media, and gun rights activist organisations. The desire for firearms as weapons of self-defence seems to emerge from perceptions of fear that draw on real lived experience of threat - many of my interlocutors have served in the military or suffered from discrimination or abuse. Carrying a firearm is said to combat existential insecurity by providing an ideological and embodied framework for defending against threat. But this ideological lens also seems to increase one's sense that there are threats "out there".

Phenomenological work on attention, perception, and embodiment may open up how these subjective meanings and interpretations can solidify into habitual behaviours. While these approaches can be accused of reducing the world to individual experience (Desjarlais 1997; Knibbe & Versteeg 2008), anthropologists have used isni phenomenology to show how the embodied presence of others can constitute meaning in objects of attention (Desjarlai 2003; Beauchez 2017). Csordas (1993) proposes that perception cannot be removed from culturally conditioned ways of paying attention to physical sensations. Ways of attending to the body attribute form and meaning to perceptions that reference larger socio-cultural systems of belief and experience. These "somatic modes of attention" (Csordas 1993: 138) are usually only consciously available when the body fails in some way (Jenkins and Valiente 1994; Jenkins 2015) or when acquiring a new technique of the body.

While many phenomenologists assume a universality to the body, some scholars have suggested that how one perceives the body and what actions are possible as a result of this are related to histories of ethno-racial relations (Fanon 1986; Ahmed 2007). Whiteness puts the capacity to carry a gun for self-defence within reach as a habitual behaviour, yet even appearing to reach for a firearm as a non-white person makes one the legitimate target of violent suppression. Bodily perceptions can be placed in relation to a variety of ethno-racial assignments and can even be obscured by how the epidermis is perceived as linked to behaviour within a particular society (Ahmed 2007: 153).

If attention is drawn immediately to the contact between hand and firearm before one shoots a gun, then the rest of the body seems to "trail behind" as far as awareness is concerned. The body is there, stable and supportive, yet it is only the hand that is "visible". Ahmed argues that whiteness is like this. While the firearm sitting at the hip of my interlocutors may be starkly present in awareness when moving through public space, the very thing that makes them feel comfortable doing so "trails behind". They do not recognise the way in which the body is linked to their racial identity that none seem to recognise themselves as possessing. Habits form the boundaries of space and they shape what bodies can do. Whiteness suggests a kind of positive residence in space: an invisibility that makes the choice to carry a firearm conceivable within the law. But spaces take on the qualities of the people who inhabit and dominate them (2007: 157): what remains unspoken is the way in which this excludes those who do not physically match the qualities associated with that space. Whiteness implies a full belonging in what the body is capable of. Not to be white in such situations is to see the body as something that restricts rather than affords action (Fanon1986: 111)

Many of my informants suggested that when they started carrying a weapon in public, they were suddenly hyper-aware of the gun sitting at their hip. They had to develop new ways of attending to the body and negotiating space. On the other hand, they also said that over time the gun disappears into the body, becoming as normal as any other aspect of their embodiment. As the physical barriers that arise from carrying a weapon are negotiated, firearms sink into the normal unconsciousness of the body (Leder 1990). Exposure to a gun synthesizes the object into the subjectivity of the perceiver, thus collapsing distinctions between object-subject and mind-matter. In the act of shooting however, the gun once again makes itself jarringly known within embodied experience as the kickback, explosive discharge, and harsh metallic frame interact with the body of the wielder.

In a dialectical process between perception and representation, guns and humans come together in hybrid, inter-subjective formations. In order to account for these physical processes, I utilise Haraway's (1985) metaphor of the cyborg – an entity that pieces its identity together in a collaboration between machine and human, between conventional models and experience. These experiences of subjectivity are created across human and non-human matter to produce hybrids with extra-human skills. The term cyborg is more of a useful imaginative tool than a

theory, one that helps me to understand how my informants map out spatial, social, and bodily realities through their relationships with firearms.

Carrying a gun becomes a taken for granted aspect of embodied existence. This taken-for-grantedness can also occur at the level of social groups in a process that makes social positions, beliefs, and practices appear as self-evident. Bourdieu (1977) calls this *Doxa*, in which an established order reproduces it existence through the naturalisation of its own arbitrariness. Unlike orthodox or heterodox beliefs that imply an awareness of different ways of life, *Doxa* describes the ways in which schemes of thought and perception create boundaries around the world to produce a sense of objectivity about the subjectively experienced world. Embodied experience is put into dialogue with wider socio-cultural beliefs and practices which gives a system a material and symbolic life that reinforces a sense that it is natural. "What is essential *goes without saying because it comes without saying"* (Bourdieu 1977: 167).

The embodied behaviours and symbols that reproduce *Doxa* structure individual actions, but can also solidify into more lasting dispositions and habits that place interpretive frameworks onto experiences of the world. The more stable the objective structures are and the more fully they reproduce themselves in a person's mind the greater the power of the field of *Doxa*. This is further compounded when these dispositions are confirmed and reinforced by other members of a group or by social institutions which reference these practices (such as the National Rifle Association, San Diego County Gun Owners, local gun ranges, and political leaders). When the private experiences of shooting meet public recognition and expression they undergo a change of state, partially reconstituted within an already established discourse of gun rights and use.

When habitual behaviours, symbols, and mythical structures match the internalized structures of the mind, a political or ethical order that is essentially arbitrary and contingent appears as self-evident. This guides interpretation of events like mass shootings, but also personal experiences of threat. Each embodied subject position is unique, yet there are shared qualities that can be located and described that help to elucidate how it is that firearms ownership remains such an important component of American political debate and many people's day to day lives. This thesis will utilise my own acquisition of shooting skills to tell a person-centred story of how a new mode of attention can be cultivated and incorporated into the body.

Good Guys, and Bad Guys

Some of my interlocutors spoke of an almost spontaneous sense of ethical responsibility that accompanies wielding a firearm. One middle aged, white gun owner called Jack said:

> In my experience in teaching people to shoot, taking them to the range who have never shot before, there's a profound transition that takes place. It happened to me, I see something change in them, what I experienced was, "wow I literally hold in my hand the power of life and death", and there's a profound responsibility that I was suddenly imbued with that I didn't really expect. It just sort of came over me.

Gun owners explicitly cultivate an ethical gaze that relates to this physical process as they move through the world, guarding public spaces with the knowledge that they might have to use deadly force if they encounter a "bad guy". Csordas (2013) and Caton (2010) argue that the anthropology of ethics needs to deal more directly with what they call the "problem of evil". Csordas urges anthropologists to attend to the ways in which "evil" is still relevant to the groups of people we encounter in the field (2013: 526). Furthermore, I suggest that once evil has been located and defined, it can give a guide as to what constitutes the categories of human and in-human, good guy and monster (Pocock 1985; Anderson 2017).

The gun owners I got to know divide their world into "good guys" and "bad guys", and by a process of extrapolation turn this into a generalised theory of good and evil. Identifying who belongs in what category becomes an important job that gun owners engage in as they take on the vigilante responsibilities of policing public spaces while carrying a gun. This narrative is complimented by a further division of humanity that my informants alluded to. They use a biblical metaphor to describe the distinction between two categories – one human and one inhuman through the analogous, "sheep, sheepdogs, and wolves". The sheep in society are willing to go on acting as if life isn't dangerous (they would often reference advocates of gun control, liberals in general, as well as a vaguely defined population of Americans called millennials), but they require sheepdogs (gun owners) willing to live a hardier life to keep the wolves (violent criminals) from taking weaker members of the herd. This boundary work is a way of imagining a coherent ethical universe (Anderson 2017).

"Bad guys" are monstrous figures of purely evil intent. Mythically, monsters impart lessons about what the world is like – suggesting that random acts of cruelty can occur at any moment (Fernando 2018). Monsters represent forces that go beyond any one person's ability to resist their power. A monster breaks all of the conventions of social-ethical conduct and in the process becomes a threat to the very functioning of society. To defeat a monster requires extra-human capabilities and wielding a firearm is one way of extending the self, utilising a magically invested tool in conjunction with one's own embodiment to combat the threat of monsters (Harraway 1985; Spingwood 2014; Saramifar 2017). In seeking to defend themselves from monsters, gun owners become the heroes of the contemporary era, thus removing them from the category of victim (sheep).

While my interlocutors aim to cultivate a capacity to kill monsters, they must take on some of their violent qualities in order to fulfil this role. This is when their spontaneous ethical insights (as mentioned above by Jack) and a committed reflection about what they are willing to do create a superior ability to wield the means of violence for good. This ties a capacity to enact deadly violence to their identity as ethical citizens, but also absolves them of the consequences of such violence – thus preserving some of their status as innocents.

This boundary work generates an ethical theory of humanity that is perpetuated within gun owning communities across the United States. In the absence of distinct religious theorizations of evil, gun ownership provides a kind of secular-ethical system that reproduces a historically dominant way of placing value on some lives over others based on who belongs in America. The social and bodily privileges of whiteness are reproduced by training with a weapon that has been associated with maintaining racial hierarchy before and after the abolition of slavery. My interlocutors carry firearms in order to repel violent threats which are often cast in racial images that draw on historical stereotypes of violent African-American men or Hispanic immigrants. Barely concealed national anxieties about racial conflict come into focus in the practices and rhetoric of defensive shooting.

Gun ownership represents a set of practices and ideologies that constitute what Bellah has called "American civil religion" (Bellah 1967; quoting de Tocqueville 1835). In the contemporary United States, there is a crisis in confidence about the shared symbols of national unity. This uncertainty seems to have created the extreme polarisation that defines what some have called a "culture war" (White 2017). Through wielding a firearm, some Americans can

become conduits for national sovereignty, instrumental in maintaining a division in the monopoly of violence that in many European parliamentary systems is held entirely by the state. My interlocutors seemed to believe that the gun confers superior ethical insight, yet they necessarily lack the omniscience, benevolence, and perspective of a disinterested Leviathan. Gun owners place an absolute moral framework of good and evil onto the messy and ethically complex motivations humans have for action. This becomes tied to a national project that enforces boundaries of who belongs in America with murderous potential.

A Phenomenology of Fear

When I reflect on why people told me they wanted guns, I am drawn into the realm of emotion, into an analytical space that focuses on the relationship between perceptions of the world and articulated descriptions of those sensations in emotional terms. Following Airlie Hochschild (2016), I believe that in order to understand the American right-wing from the perspective of those within it, one needs a framework for emotion. The way in which someone interprets and attributes meaning to the ownership of firearms, but also the speech of a political leader, has everything to do with the way that they resonate emotionally with their ideology or message. Hochschild explores the potential of this analytical gaze in her ethnographic study of Tea Party supporters in Louisiana. She gained real depth of understanding of one woman's life just by taking time to engage in extended conversation. Hochschild says:

> It built the scaffolding of an empathy bridge. We, on both sides, wrongly imagine that empathy with the 'other' side brings an end to clearheaded analysis when, in truth, it's on the other side of that bridge that the most important analysis can begin. (2016: xiii)

Hochschild took time to inquire about the inner emotional lives of white, working class Republican voters to understand how this can give texture and background to their political perspectives. She says that this produced a "deep story" or "narrative as *felt*" in which validity is drawn from a world view that "feels as if it were true" (2016: xi). In accounts of my interlocutor's lives and their interactions with other gun owners, I aim to explore how these felt narratives can shed light on why someone like Donald Trump was able to appeal to so many Americans; how fear plays a key role in political decision making; and how the political and personal come together in the embodied experience of shooting.

Harding has highlighted the problem that anthropology has with taking its own "others" seriously (1991). The academic gaze and its accompanying language constructs a world in which there are rational and irrational subjects. In Harding's case, she shows how the media, but also academics, carefully portrayed fundamentalist Christians as "backwards" biblical literalists whose behaviour or beliefs were beyond reasonable explanation. Similarly, within pro-gun control groups, gun rights activists are sometimes cast as backwards, tradition obsessed, and potentially dangerous to modern America. While it was at times hard, it would have been disrespectful to withhold the kind of methodological, non-judgmental gaze that many anthropologists would happily apply to those groups of people who we more obviously mark as "different" in other parts of the world. Otherwise we reinforce a historical tendency of exoticising difference based on its location and its aesthetic.

However, this does not mean that I aim to make this an exercise in pointing out how "modern" my interlocutors are by making their worldview rational to an outsider. This would reinforce the idea that humans are rational actors in their political and personal orientations. Instead, I attempt to present a broad context for the motivations for purchasing and being around firearms that shows the way in which gun ownership as a practice fits into a "rational" political discourse of modernity. It is within my own experiences of shooting and being around gun owners that I learned that it is in those emotionally salient memories of personal experience that my interlocutors become firmly attached to firearms. These experiences have to be framed within a rational discourse about personal safety and self-defence in order to inhabit a legitimate place within political debate, but it is in the texture of fear, love, play, and social connection that attachments to firearms are made.

My interlocutors found real purpose in their engagement with gun rights activism. They came to own and use guns in order to overcome or help to place a meaningful narrative on to difficult/traumatic life events, recasting pain as a necessary wake up call to the dangers of life, particularly for women and LGBTQ+ shooters. This is an empowering narrative that can explain important transitions in life. For men who have served in the military, the familiarity of the rituals and beliefs that come with owning a gun represent a return to the kind of lifestyle that they found while in the armed forces (Shapira 2013). Defensive shooting counter-acts perceptions of political impotence and existential threat.

Listening to gun owners and being able to hear them was an ongoing challenge of getting out of my own way. I had to train myself not to put every opinion that my informants expressed into relationship with how I felt about that issue. However, more challenging moments did catch me off guard. I listened to one wealthy, white man complain about violence within African-American communities as if it were a problem endemic to this demographic and was occurring far away from him. Although I suspected that many of my interlocutors held similar views, it was extremely rare that they would express them in my presence. On this occasion I was seized by a sense of anger and, harder to admit, disgust for the man sitting opposite me. I had spent a year getting to know him, shooting with him at desert ranges, and attending gun rights activist meetings with him. He is a loving father and husband. But, in this moment, I struggled with my own justifications for listening to political opponents and was having a reaction that challenged the foundations of the empathy bridge that we had carefully constructed over the previous ten months.

My reaction was also clouded by the strange professional sense of obligation that I felt towards him. I had explicitly cultivated a relationship with this man that would allow me to gather the data I needed to write an ethnography of gun ownership. This rapport building had been successful and here I was being confronted with the fruits of that labour. He felt comfortable enough to express an opinion that he had been guarding from me up to this point. In this moment, I felt contrasting personal and professional motivations that many anthropologists have had to navigate. The ethnographic method relies on "anti-social" (Mosse 2006) cycles of forming and then breaking attachments in the process of writing – especially when that writing is about people in positions of power or social privilege. Although I obtained verbal informed consent from all of the gun owners in this thesis, the close-up and personal way in which ethnography builds relationships throws into ambiguity the on-going nature of this consent in a way that I still find uncomfortable.

In his work with perpetrators of mass violence in Argentina, Robben (1995) reflects on the way in which the twin goals of ethnography, namely rapport building and detachment, come into conflict as researcher and interlocutor respond to each other in interviews. Ethnographic seduction, Robben writes, occurs as we try to grasp an interlocutor's world view from their perspective but pay attention only to the aesthetic or sensory aspects of their speech. We have to be aware that interlocutors may consciously or unconsciously deploy strategies of seduction to justify particular practices or behaviours. The anthropologist's job is to notice how this

makes us feel, how we respond to emotional cues, and our own spontaneous judgements of authenticity.

I often felt gun owners were pointedly trying to bring me over to their way of thinking in interviews. Their use of logical argument, personal anecdote, and stirring rhetoric often induced emotional connection in which we shared laughter or, in a number of cases, tears. I walked away from these interviews feeling a sense of solidarity with my interlocutors as they told me about traumatic events in their lives or recounted the real fear they feel. I was grateful for the trust they placed in me to not only listen but also to tell their story. On the other hand, the way they deployed rational discourse and sophisticated "greater-good" arguments to justify the exercise of deadly violence often jarred with my own moral world.

Unable to fully connect with my interlocutors and feeling separated from my friends and family at home, I had a constant sense of a lack of belonging and even physical insecurity around gun owners. However, as scholars have shown (Rosaldo 2014), an anthropologist's personal experiences play an important role in understanding particular cultural practices. Only after experiencing the "emotional force" of grief that accompanied the death of his wife while in the field did Rosaldo understand the connection that his informants made between losing a loved one and traditional headhunting rituals. Lack of exposure to emotional force can exclude a researcher from understanding the ways that people experience culturally specific emotions. My ability to grasp the ideas and emotions that motivated my informants to seek out and train with firearms was constrained by identifiable markers like my gender, ethnicity, nationality, and age, but also by less tangible boundaries that were placed around experiences that I had not and might never share with them.

Throughout my fieldwork I began to realise that fear was a central motivation for purchasing firearms, but I struggled to understand it. As I got to know and embedded myself within the suburban or rural spaces in which they lived, I saw safe neighbourhoods and affluent lives untouched by the kinds of violence that they seemed to be preparing for. However, a number of different experiences led me to a personal understanding of fear that made their desires for personal protection far more comprehensible.

As the 2016 general election drew closer a creeping sense of anxiety grew in me as I imagined a year of fieldwork in which I would have to win the trust of and live in the shoes of many

people who supported Donald Trump. The president enters the homes of Americans nightly through the filter of 24-hour news networks that variously portray him as an incompetent fool, a dangerous traitor, or an American hero saving the nation from decline. The scrolling updates and never-ending breaking news coverage presents the state of political affairs as close to major breakdown.

Breaking news implies a rupture into a pre and post-event. The moment of a break ends any innocence of catastrophe, destroyed by the splitting of time. Yet "breaking" is a verb. It is a happening. Rather than describing what *is,* news media implies an end of the world that never quite arrives. This coming event works on a 24-hour cycle and so anticipation permeates the narrative of breaking. The end of the world will come tomorrow and viewers can do nothing except tune in again to get the latest story[3]. The apocalypse is always cancelled, yet the fear that it is just one day away infuses the daily lives of many Americans.

President Donald Trump quickly became a manifested entity within my life as I bounced between the disgust I felt at his rhetoric to the admiration given to him by gun owners. The story that Trump tells about America identifies threats to the nation from within and without, particularly highlighting immigration from Latin American and Muslim majority countries, the dangers of drug related gang violence in inner-city neighbourhoods, and the imagined role that former President Barack Obama played in creating these problems.

Beneath each proposed threat there seems to be a thinly veiled racist narrative that normalizes extreme policies with the justification that there is a basic need to secure borders and crack down on violence. This rhetoric played into the conditioned fears that gun owners have picked up through defensive training. The image of America in decline and of the need to protect oneself dove-tails with an older story of othering that encompasses popular thinking about threats from within society from "un-American" populations and in national threats to security. Gun owners are caught up in militaristic rhetoric around the "war on terror" and "radical Islam", opposition to immigration (Holmes and Castenada 2016), and anxieties about recent African-American resistance to police violence in places like Ferguson, Missouri (Bonilla & Rosa 2015; Burton 2015).

[3] This is a state of existence that documentary film maker Adam Curtis has called "Hypernormalisation" (2016).

One surprising side-effect of spending so much time with gun owners was how quickly fear came to inhabit perceptions of my own sense of safety. Their anxieties about dangerous immigrants, home invasions, and physical assault gave me a sense that I was under scrutiny from unknown powerful forces. Fear entered into my daily life by osmosis. Part of this creeping anxiety was produced by my discomfort around firearms. Initially I dreaded going to shooting ranges where the overpowering sounds of guns firing placed me in a physiological state of insecurity. In the first months of my fieldwork, I jumped as every shot rattled my body and the acidic, polluted smell of the chemical discharge caught in my throat. However, gun violence also entered into my life in surprising and challenging ways throughout my fieldwork.

In March 2017, a middle-aged white man shot eight African American and Hispanic residents of his apartment block while they attended a pool party, killing one and severely injuring several others. This shooting occurred two blocks from my apartment and in the following weeks I felt alienated from my surroundings. Walking on familiar streets I was suddenly less secure. I started to practise some of the defensive awareness techniques that I had picked up at firearms training courses. I observed people coming in and out of my favourite café where I would write fieldnotes, looking for signs of danger. This lens on the world encouraged fear to become a pervasive focus of my embodied experience, but the techniques also gave me something to do with that fear. My experiments with this gaze made me realise that there was something about the regular contact I had with guns that intensified my perceptions of fear. My attention had become directed by the inter-subjectivity between an object and my body.

The year that I spent around gun owners was personally challenging in a number of different ways. I returned from the field anxious, unsure of my sense of physical safety in familiar surroundings that in turn impacted on my emotional security. While I want to acknowledge key differences between my own and my interlocutor's experiences, I also want to suggest that my encounters with fear can say something more general about how the desire for firearms is produced. Fear mobilises the need for a personal means of self-defence, while joy and excitement encourage shooters to join sports shooting teams or visit gun ranges with friends. These subjectively experienced emotions also give an urgency and embodied resonance to arguments for gun ownership that are often framed in legalistic or historical terms.

But fear is not one thing. It is not just a churning stomach, sweaty palms, and anxiety. Fear can also be motivating. It can push a person to contemplate important questions like; What is my

role in society? Am I at risk of physical attack? How should I prepare for societal breakdown? Fear also allows people to overcome something and can create a meaningful narrative of purpose. It can bring joy and elation when it is conquered. The conceptual, and potentially real, closeness to danger that gun use implies can lead a person into a more open, but often pessimistic, relationship with the darker aspects of human behaviour.

Chapter Summaries

As a general direction this thesis moves from a broad socio-cultural analysis to a more individual focus on embodied experience. ***Chapter one*** introduces the reader to many of the annual events that San Diego County Gun Owners engage in. I show how a meaningful life can be created through gun rights activism, in particular by looking at the biography of Michael Schwartz, the founder of SDCGO. The language used by his organisation (and many other gun rights groups) frames the debate over gun ownership as a literal fight. This extends military metaphors used commonly to describe firearm use at defensive shooting courses, making it possible to call gun control advocates "the enemy".

This antagonistic style breeds a strong connection between in-group members. The bonds within San Diego County Gun Owners were made during monthly activist meetings and social events, but were cemented by sharing in the physical trials of learning to shoot together. The bipartisanship so often referenced in media, political, and academic conversations about the state of contemporary American thought is also a lived experience that is constitutive of identity. However, the simple divisions made between conservatives and liberals come into contact with the complexity of lived experience as they are encountered contexts in which gun rights activists spend time with their opponents and make connections across the boundaries that bipartisanship creates.

Chapter two explores how national myths, symbols, and ideologies appear in the lives of my interlocutors. The way in which archeptypical representations of gun wielding men are portrayed in contemporary fictional and political narratives about what it means to be American makes a space for violence within the ethical behaviour of citizens. These stories create normative masculine role models out of quasi-historical figures like Teddy Roosevelt and Buffalo Bill. They also link contemporary gun rights rhetoric to a history that is seen as full of examples of "good guys" winning the fight against evil with a firearm. I describe the time that

I spent observing a Cowboy Action Shooting match to show how the past is brought into the present in the embodied dramas of a re-enactment sport that simulates frontier-era ethical dilemmas for the modern city dweller.

Similarly, I look at how fictional portrayals of American men in movies and novels feeds into understandings of the role that my interlocutors feel they should play within a family, a community, and a nation. Within these mythologies of American identity is a thinly veiled commentary on who belongs in the United States, pointing to ethnically marked "others" who often play the part of enemy in the stories that gun owners tell each other. This shows the way in which successful, even ethical, citizenship has within it a place for wielding violence through firearms.

In ***chapter three*** I look at how the narratives of vulnerability that I outlined in chapter one can take on a new life within demographics of Americans who are statistically more likely to suffer from prejudice and abuse. Many transgender members of the Pink Pistols told me about experiences of violence or threat that occurred because of their gender presentation. These experiences informed how they conceptualised their embodied safety in the world. Gun rights rhetoric provided an empowering account of becoming safe and the practice of learning to shoot gave them the physiological evidence and control over their bodies that convinced them that they would be able to resist future attacks

The Pink Pistols show the extent to which firearms become linked with the way the world is experienced through the body. The addition of guns to the body creates new opportunities for action as well as ethical or political thought. Whether one carries a gun in public or not often reflects my interlocutor's sense of how likely they are to survive a violent attack As they embark on the process of transitioning to, what one trans woman called, her "authentic self", firearms become linked to a sense of belonging safely within a new body.

Chapter four examines the way guns become aspects of embodied experience by exploring how my interlocutors learn to shoot. In an account of a four-day defensive handgun course that I attended in Nevada with a number of my informants, I show how loading, aiming, and firing a gun can become embedded in the automatic responses of the body. After participating in hundreds of repetitions of drills that simulate how one would respond in the case of being attacked, I unlocked a speed and control when shooting that was surprising and alarming.

During this course I sat with my informants through lectures that discussed the moral and ethical implications of using a gun in self-defence. We were encouraged to think through how we would react in advance and decide on what we were willing to do. This demonstrates a unique set of ethical challenges that gun wielders face as they imagine a role for themselves in a society as protectors with the legitimate means to use violence. This requires reflective ethical thought to accompany a physical training regime. The body therefore becomes the testing ground for ethical thought that proves to be more complex in practice than in theory. The addition of a kind of ethical code provided by both a local community of shooters, but also the shooting course I attended gives gun owners a holistic system for making meaningful sense of violence, death, and one's place in society. A role that religion might have played in previous generations.

In ***chapter five*** I continue to build a case for the importance of the body by looking at how shooting sports incorporate ethical conduct within a playful competitive context. I reflect on how I was at first unable to accept the idea that people liked guns simply because they considered them fun. Within the embodied play and competitive sociality of a shooting sports team, fun takes on a multi-dimensional role as a means of dramatizing the ethical dilemmas that I discussed in chapter four. Play is a mode of engaging the world in a physically experimental way that poses the question "what if" about important social or personal events.

The stages of a sports shooting match simulate various practical contexts in which gun owners imagine that they might need to use a gun in self-defence. As the team competes in timed relays, they also spar with jokes that establish a hierarchy based on shooting skills, echoing military-style command structures that discipline men socially around accusation of homosexuality. They also share opinions about local or national events and collaborate by teaching each other the best techniques for shooting. Positive associations between shooting and community are created in this competition that also reinforce the idea that firearms are useful defensive tools as they share instances in which a gun saved someone's life. By exploring these ideas through play, my interlocutors are able to live out how they would respond to a home invasion or violent assault. They find learning these skills challenging but ultimately fun, as social groups form around shooting events.

In the ***sixth chapter*** I address head on the infamous question of whether it is guns or people that kill people. By using everything I have discussed so far in this thesis, I explore how guns as material objects create opportunities for exchanges between the bodies and ideas that they come into contact with. When firearms become embedded within habitual routines and the body they form a kind of hybrid entity with its own ways of interpreting and responding to external events. I attempt to move beyond debates about relationships between objects and people that focus on agency and instead use examples of how my interlocutors spoke about their bodies changing after they began to carry a firearm in public. These observations were made possible by a change in concealed carry rights in San Diego County in 2018. As carrying a firearm became a reality for many members of the San Diego County Gun Owners, both their ambivalence and certainty about its value shows how objects can become caught in webs of ethical decision making that combine with physical evidence from the body.

The process of becoming intimate with a gun through carrying it creates a person with enhanced powers to enact violence and therefore inevitably leads to a shift in the way they interpret the world, especially in regards to its threatening potential. Experiments in social psychology suggest that this hybrid entity has a higher chance of committing violent acts. I build on these experiments with nuanced ethnographic data that can open the black box that forms as guns and humans come together in novel arrangements. This further emphasizes the way in which beliefs and ideologies can find an enduring place within lived bodily experiences that can confirm or challenge their legitimacy.

Chapter. 1

‘Fighting’ For Gun Rights in San Diego County

“Gun Prom”

As summer approached in southern California, the San Diego County Gun Owners (SDCGO) held its annual fundraising event. The 2nd Amendment celebration dinner - affectionately termed ‘gun prom’ by many of my interlocutors - took place in the Crown Room of the Hotel Del Coronado on an island off the coast of downtown San Diego. Positioned as a chance for gun owners to acknowledge a year of local activist work, 400 guests were seated for dinner, speeches, and an award ceremony in the hotel’s ball room. Twin American flags sit at either side of a stage at the centre of the room and crown-like chandeliers hang from a ceiling built out of California redwood trees.

Figure 1

I arrive early to find an unusually nervous Michael Schwartz talking to hotel staff. He spots me from across the room and beckons me over with a wave of his hand, "Joe, can I put you to work?" As founder and executive director of San Diego County Gun Owners the success or failure of the event rests on his shoulders. He has traded in his usual casual wear for a sharp looking black suit that makes him look younger than his 42 years.

While we lay cutlery, napkins and San Diego County Gun Owners memorabilia on the tables Michael boasts that tickets have sold out for the event. At $1200 for a table of eight, the dinner functions as a fundraising drive and throughout the night there will be a number of chances for guests to donate to the organisation. Michael also uses it as an opportunity to advertise the ways that his organisation has been working to support and elect pro-firearm politicians across San Diego County. With the table decorations complete, we stand back to take in the room. My eyes are drawn to the centrepiece on each table - a clear vase of tall white flowers that burrow into artificial soil made up of used ammunition cartridges (*Figure 2*); a symbolic gesture towards the notion that life can flourish from what might look like a representation of death to many.

Figure 2

As guests start to arrive, Michael asks me to sell raffle tickets for a prize draw that many members of the organisation have told me they have been looking forward to. The draw contains prizes such as a semi-automatic shotgun, a rifle embossed with the stars and stripes of the flag (*see Figure 3*), and a whole host of handguns, boxes of ammunition, and other firearm

accessories. These weapons have been donated by local gun shops who seized on a chance to advertise their craftsmanship in a room full of gun owners. It is a testament to my continued exposure to guns that I only feel small twinges of anxiety as guests examine the weapons, passing them from hand to hand to test their weight. These literally and metaphorically prized objects evoke gasps and acquisitive longing from guests who eagerly tell me which weapons they hope to win.

Figure 3

One of my key informants, a woman called Joan, arrives into the room in characteristic bluster. Seemingly capable of executing several tasks at once while not quite succeeding at any, she asks me to hold her handbag so that she can adjust her hair while apologising for her lateness. She immediately jumps into her designated role as firearms handler for the evening by dispelling the crowds gathering around the tables shouting above their excited conversation, "No-one should be handling firearms except for me!".

Spotting one guest still holding a shotgun, she puts her hand on the weapon, holding his gaze with a steady, knowing smile born of decades of wielding authority that I recognise from the months of firearms training that she has given me, impressing the notion that it would be unwise to question her orders. Joan puts the shotgun back on the table and starts organising the other items. I gesture to a rifle that is pointing towards a table where quests are already seated. Turning the weapon around so that it faces a concrete pillar, she smiles and quotes one of the

four safety rules for handling firearms that she has been teaching me: “Never point a gun at anything you aren’t willing to destroy”.

Now at a distance due to Joan’s effective policing, guests survey the table of prizes and buy raffle tickets for $100, $500, and even $1000 at a time for a chance to win. One white haired gentlemen with an elite looking credit card grumbles about the card payment system that Michael has opted to use while his wife hangs back impatiently. As I struggle to explain the process he says under his breath: “What’s wrong with cash”.

As the evening’s host, a local radio celebrity, takes to the stage I find my seat near the centre of the room. After cracking a number of themed jokes his voice takes on a more reverent tone. Before I realise what is happening, the whole crowd stands to face the American flags next to the stage. Stetson hats are removed from heads and hands placed on hearts as 400 San Diegans begin to recite the pledge of allegiance. I mumble along, hoping that no-one is paying too much attention to me. Why would they? Looking around the room I see only a sincere and intense focus on the flag. As the final lines reflect from the rafters of the ballroom, some guests whoop, cheer, and clap while the host establishes control by saying, “God bless our troops”.

A number of San Diego County Gun Owners board members give speeches about their successes throughout the year, detailing specific politicians they helped to elect or local gun control policies that have been defeated, but often they use the opportunity to complain about the ‘liberal politics of California’ or to lament the decline in respect for gun ownership among younger generations. One professional sports shooter spoke emphatically about the differences between liberals and conservatives in a speech that aimed to rouse gun owners into joining in with direct political action:

> Those on the left of the political spectrum organise well because they believe heavily in collectivism and group-think, it just comes naturally to them. The right side of the spectrum is made up of rugged individualists, we pride ourselves on individualism, we reject group think and dependency on others. We have jobs, we have families, we just want our government to leave us alone. By our nature we simply don’t organize well.

This statement articulates the qualities that many of my interlocutors see themselves as possessing: self-made and hardworking, they are willing to protect their kin with deadly

violence. They don't ask for help from the government, in fact, they reject the notion that anyone should accept state aid of any sort - although this critique only seems to extend to assisted healthcare, social security, and housing benefits and not to roads, bridges, the police force, or the military. One key point is the way he characterises the reluctance with which gun owners engage in a political fight to preserve the right to keep and bear arms. Gun owning men often seem to talk of this as a burden that has fallen to them, contradicting their preference for private, individualised lives. However, as this and subsequent chapters show, it is in the practices, community, and ideologies of gun rights activism that my interlocutors find renewed meaning and purpose in life.

In his critique of left wing political movements, this sports shooter stresses that there are fundamental differences between liberal and conservative approaches to political activism. He says that conservatives (an identity category that he places himself within) are individualists and implies a kind of superiority, yet then goes on to suggest that the left are better at coming together around a cause and thus represent formidable opponents, especially in the debate about gun control. The lived categories of liberal and conservative are made through seeing each as opposed. Gun owners seek to do political battle against an enemy that is seen as morally weak but politically strong, framing a political debate in the language of a literal 'fight'.

Many San Diego County Gun Owners members have served time in the military and so this rhetoric evokes a familiar sense of purpose and belonging that they gained from their service. In a city where the coastal landscape and a large proportion of the population is marked by the military, bounding the debate about gun rights within the metaphor of a "battle" brings conservative men, women, and members of the LGBTQ+ community together to engage in a fight with an imagined enemy – liberals, the state of California, and Democratic politicians.

Hobbies and institutions that extend or reflect military-style command structures can maintain a sense of belonging and stability while veterans integrate back into civilian life (Ben-Ari & Sion 2005; Shapira 2013). The rigid social organisation and expectations that the military places on its recruits can come to define how a person's identity is constructed. The loss of this structure often shakes the foundations of the self. Positioning gun rights activism as a life or death fight gives renewed meaning to men's lives within familiar narrative motifs.

The gun itself may also draw particular metaphors around it, its materiality shaping the way in which language can be used to describe why the private ownership of such weapons should be seen as a legitimate means of self-defence. This language reflects the purposes for which firearms are designed, for killing humans and other animals. Almost all of my interlocutors suggest that their main motivation for purchasing firearms was self-defence. They aim to extend their lives by learning the skills of defensive shooting, claiming that this is necessary due to pervasive threats to their lives. In the process of training to meet these perceived threats they find purpose in the role of protecting their immediate family or social group, and their nation. This securely cements men - but also, as I will show, women and non-binary gun owners - within a role in their communities, families, and country. This role is affirmed by the connections and mutual beliefs they find in gun rights activist groups and shooting sports. Purpose emerges from within the cracks of an imagined death, throwing new light onto both the precarity and rarity of human existence. Sharing in ethical reflections on the likelihood of violent death with other gun owners creates deep bonds of mutual trust.

Gun rights organisations strategically deploy the notion of embodied vulnerability to argue for the benefits of using a gun in self-defence. This 'politics of vulnerability' (Carlson 2014b) constructs a category of existential insecurity or victimhood from which gun owners can claim an enhanced need for defensive weaponry. In this process, shooters define their own sense of physical security within their bodies, in a local community, and in a nation by taking on and remodelling stereotypically male gender roles. My female interlocutors show the ways in which strength and autonomy are blending with notions of feminine vulnerability to create new gendered roles and subject positions. Defensive gun use and its accompanying ideologies seem to, as several women told me, 'empower' them to reject labels of weakness or insecurity that they feel they inhabit as part of their gendered identity. However, the way in which gun rights organisations conceptualise the kinds of crime that women are likely to face draws on distinctly male experiences of violence (Carlson 2014a).

My interlocturos tie gun rights to American national superiority. Nationalism as an analytical category can act as a useful way of understanding how people narrativise their participation in practices and ideologies that constitute national identity, suggesting that the self can be made distinctly "American". For my interlocutors, national identity and belonging is elevated beyond markers such as class, gender, or ethnicity. As Joan once told me, "I am a human first, an American second, a Republican third, and trans last".

Nationalism is both a force in politics (one of contemporary significance) and a style of cultural production; nationalist writers, artists, and composers seek to "uncover, create, protect, or restore the true culture of the nation" (Spencer 1990: 283). Gun owning spaces are key sites of nationalist production. America is made real in the practices and words of a particular interpretation of a shared past and future. All gun owners have to do is look around at the flags hanging on every available surface and engage with practices like the pledge of allegiance and political activism to tangibly perceive the reality of their national identity.

As I will explore in proceeding chapters, by learning to shoot, these nationalist themes are brought within the confines of the body to create a unique political subjectivity. Perceptual schema are developed that act as reflecting pools that show the gun owner personal and national enemies all around them. America is imagined (Anderson 2006 [1983]) and rendered tangible in gun owning spaces and in the practices of shooting, which place Stars and Stripes tinted glasses onto any engagement with firearms, whether it be practical or political.

My use of the term nationalism is largely descriptive, but I do not want to suggest that national identity can be seen as a bounded or continuous notion. Trying to define an “American nationalism” is about as useful as trying to point at an image of American culture more broadly. The nationalist productions of gun rights advocates represent the perspective of a historically dominant group of people who interpret the past in particular ways that meet personal and political needs (Spencer 1990: 288). I will explore the techniques by which America is represented and made real within San Diego County Gun Owners events. I show how personal stories of gendered and national identities link to narratives of the self, how enemies are created in order to constitute a coherence within a diverse group of gun owners with competing interests, how victimhood and vulnerability are wielded politically to legitimate claims to identity, and how elements of material culture are utilised to represent and confirm national belonging.

This chapter will explore how gun owners come to inhabit a life of persistent political and existential battle. Victory can only be achieved with continued access to firearms. Gun rights activists find a purpose and meaning within their political and practical engagement with firearms, thus placing guns at the centre of a constructed notion of the self. Firearms secure the self and sediment the relational categories of husband, wife, father, mother, and citizen within

political action and narratives of identity. The way in which boundaries are placed around these labels are productive in constituting belonging and identity. Each constructed category pivots around a dualism, creating a polarized image of political thought. In the antagonism that ensues when these two poles meet - in presidential debates, town hall meetings, or reports of pro-gun control protests in San Diego - a coherent sense of self is solidified and made real. Gun owners can only define themselves as American, as activists, and as family members in the opposition they create in political opponents and existential threats to their lives. This shows the power of "othering" as an essential component of self-fashioning in the contemporary Untied States.

A Biography of a Gun Rights Activist

As the speeches from his board members come to a close at the 2nd Amendment Celebration Dinner, Michael Schwartz hovers next to the stage, pawing nervously at the red tie around his neck. The host introduces him by listing his achievements as the "visionary at the head of a gun rights movement in Southern California". The crowd erupts into the biggest cheer of the night as he takes to the stage followed by a lengthy standing ovation. Michael points and smiles at friends in the audience, grinning as they shout encouragement or joking insults. He suddenly looks like he is in his element as his resonant voice, so often layered with humour, echoes through the room in sincerity:

> I just want to thank everyone for coming and supporting a great cause. I have never been more proud. For the first time in the twenty years I have lived in San Diego, I see a true community and a political force to be reckoned with . . . For years, we've been out on our own island as gun owners, [but] organizing at the local level we can move mountains.

Michael is talking here about his organisation, but he could just as easily be telling a personal story about his journey from dissatisfied but successful career man to founder of the San Diego County Gun Owners. To understand the organisation, one has to understand its executive director and, in particular, the ways in which he weaves national themes into his narrative of self.

Michael was born in Panama City, Florida to a military family. With a nostalgic smile, he told me about growing up close to communist Cuba. His childhood was animated by the same Cold War concerns that gripped his nation:

> I was a kid who was always in the woods, always had a stick in the shape of a gun. I grew up in the 80s and was constantly fighting communists. That was everything I did from when I woke up on Saturday morning until school on Monday. I watched *Red Dawn*, an 80s movie, the Russians invading America, the Cubans invading America, and a bunch of high school kids fought back, and HOLY COW that just changed my whole life.

Michael's mother was a nurse and his father was an officer in the US Navy. The family kept guns in the house and at a young age Michael recalls that he was given the responsibility of looking after a BB gun. His dad taught him the basic safety rules and a little about how to shoot. However, at age 15, Michael's family was posted to Hawaii. During that time, he "just kind of forgot about [guns] for a few years, you know, I wasn't a kid anymore." This last statement is surprising given that Michael says that guns are primarily functional tools, or as he told me, "just another thing that I feel a responsible adult should have". It suggests that firearms have both practical and playful qualities to them that bring gun owners into contact with childhood fantasies (an idea I will explore further in chapter five).

Michael re-located to San Diego in his early 20s, taking a position at a bank that provides financial services to corporations. He had a successful career in this industry and says that he brought home a six-figure salary annually. However, he also describes this job as "soul sucking". It did not seem to provide him with a sense of purpose or fulfilment. In San Diego, Michael rekindled his childhood love affair with guns and started to consider them as necessary components of his life:

> I moved to San Diego when I was 21, and I was alone, and didn't know anybody, and it was seriously kind of a checklist, you know; I have a fire extinguisher, and a deadbolt, and I could dial 911, oh, and I also need a gun to protect myself. So, I went out and bought a Glock [semi-automatic handgun] and the bug kind of bit me . . . then I went right back to the store and bought a shotgun, then I went right back to the store and bought an AR15 [a semi-automatic rifle] . . . I'd take my buddies out shooting . . . they are totally

> for protection, I mean seriously, you know, I had a wrench in case I needed to tighten a bolt, I had a screwdriver in case I needed to tighten a screw, and I had a gun.

Here the dual role of firearms emerges as he describes their functional and social purpose, taking on a role as tools for home defence as well as giving the means to connect with friends over a shared hobby.

Michael's entry into the world of gun rights activism inhabits an important place within his narrative of self. He suggests that it changed his life completely. In 2010, while he and his wife were camping with another couple in the desert east of San Diego, Michael was subjected to scrutiny from a police officer due to a suspicion about a gun that he had brought along so that they could shoot at targets. The officer wanted to inspect the shotgun that Michael was cleaning when he pulled up to their campsite. Examining the barrel of the shotgun he jotted down its serial number in a notebook and told Michael that his gun was illegal in California. He returned the firearm only after checking in with a centralised database to see if the serial number had been reported stolen.

Michael talks about this encounter in vivid detail, his frustration arose more from being made to feel like he was dangerous than with a specific law:

> [The officer] and I were talking and it turned out he was a gun guy. He came to that same spot in the desert where we were with his friends to shoot! It was recreation for him. And I thought, man, he seriously wanted to put me in cuffs over a shotgun, enforcing laws he didn't know and didn't agree with. All it took was a cheque from the government and he threw his principles right out the window. And it just kind of hit me, and it sounds weird, but I got really bummed out about it, I got really sad about it, really frustrated. I sat down around the campfire after he'd left and everyone else was like, OK we're right back to where we were, and I just thought about it for a long time and just decided right then and there I was going to do something about it. So, I started volunteering, I got involved with politics, I just wanted to do something.

Crucially, this memory serves a narrative function in Michael's account of how he came to inhabit the kind of identity and life that he now values. This event was one of the factors that led him to quit his banking job so that he could dedicate himself to gun rights activism.

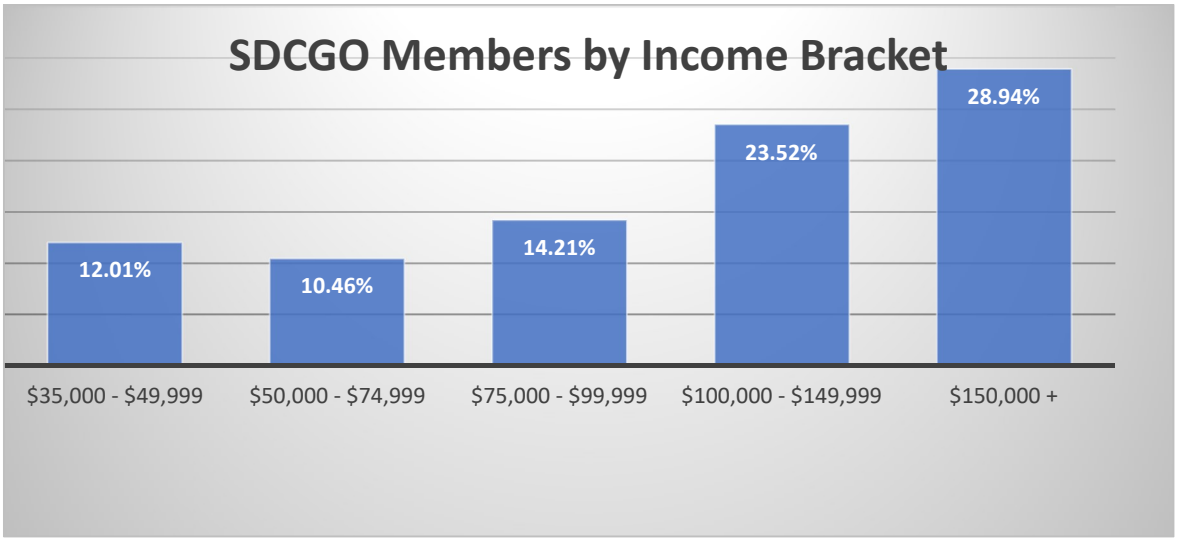
His life story in some ways pivots around the way in which this police officer made him made him feel about owning firearms.

Initially, Michael sought out a local chapter of the National Rifle Association (NRA), but found it lacking in enthusiasm and membership. He said that, "it was like 6 angry old guys in a room doing nothing." And so in October 2015, after five years of networking in the political world, building a base of support, and seeking out financial backing, Michael formed the San Diego County Gun Owners. When I asked him why he decided to do this rather than attempt to revitalise the NRA, he said that:

> Everything that we're doing, like the really really hands on stuff, like . . . talking to reporters and actually representing a group of people and speaking for them, saying 'hey, media, this is what we believe', that kind of autonomy, the bigger organisations didn't want to risk some volunteer coming out of the woodwork and saying what he thinks. They didn't trust their message to be delivered that way . . . in naming it San Diego County Gun Owners it instils a local pride. People think, 'oh that's something I can have an effect on'. It's really cool, I'm watching blue collar Joe-Lunchbox type people, who are now best friends with their mayor. They've never been involved in politics before and now they're having a scotch at their house with their mayor. They're donating money in the form of a membership.

Michael's characterisation of his organisation as one of average, working class Americans contradicts an internal survey which found that more than 50% of their base earn over $100,000 a year, with just 12% bringing home an annual income of under $50,000 (see table 1). It also showed that 77% of members are over forty and 85% of them are male. Despite this, much of the group's messaging is built around the idea that they represent everyday working people, fighting against an elite political class who design gun laws that are out of touch with what their constituents actually want.

Table 1



Michael bases his marketing strategy on sociologist Jonathan Haidt's work on the differences between liberal and conservative Americans. Haidt claims that while political orientations differ on many priorities, what matters to both is equality and fairness (Haidt 2008). San Diego County Gun Owners promotional material therefore often explicitly emphasizes the ways in which gun owners are not treated fairly in California. In one online video a sports shooter talks about leaving California due to new gun control laws. Michael's voice can be heard narrating:

> [Ted[4]] is a husband and a father. He's just like everybody else . . . California's gun laws are making it impossible for [Ted] to be a professional competitive shooter. For [Ted] to be who he wants to be, he had to take his family and leave California . . . [Ted] was a San Diego home owner and small business owner, he paid his taxes and voted in local elections, he did everything he could to be a good citizen, but was denied the freedom to pursue his dream.

This promotional clip uses the tone and messaging of a charity appeal and emphasizes that the inability to own firearms can prevent someone from being who they "want to be". Michael does everything he can to associate gun control laws with the oppression of someone's authentic identity. This echoes larger national ideas about the value of individual self-fashioning. Denying a "good citizen . . . the freedom to pursue his dream" is linked to the work of gun control groups later in the video, thus utilizing the language of fairness and equality,

[4] Name changed to preserve anonymity.

rather than following the National Rifle Association's rhetorical tactics that portray liberal protestors as violent thugs.

SDCGOs approach constructs a category of victimhood for gun owners to inhabit. Conceptualised as the targets of more powerful groups (Democrats, liberals) gun owners can become the little guy – the oppressed rather than the oppressors. In his ethnography of a traditional pigeon shoot in rural Pennsylvania, Hoon Song (2010) explores how white racial identity has gone through major transitions since the mid-20th century. Guilt about and awareness of the diminishing legitimacy of racial hierarchy has caused a kind of pre-emptive self-loathing on the part of white Americans that can manifest itself within a narrative of victimhood. This replicates the tone and language of minority claims for civil rights and provides a superficial absolution that counters claims of bias, thus further obfuscating the role that race plays in systemic socioeconomic disparities (Song 2010: 206).

Michael explicitly constructed the category of political victim at one San Diego County Meeting, brushing past any acknowledgement of the structural disparities and embodied dangers that many Americans face on the basis of race, class, or gender:

> It's tougher to be a gun owner in California than pretty much anything else . . . if you're a gun owner I want to make sure you don't feel like you're alone. I've lived in San Diego for 20 years now, for a lot of that time I thought I was the only one who cares about the 2nd amendment.

Carlson (2014b) suggests that gun rights organisations utilise a "politics of vulnerability" that emphasizes a universal susceptibility to crime, while positioning firearms as an effective method of combatting vulnerability. "Vulnerability politics" describes how feelings of insecurity play a role in political debate and action. Scholars in this field have focused on how fear of crime is embedded within intersectional categories of race, gender, and class (Butler 2004; Fineman 2008; Hollander 2011; Killias 1990; Pantazis 2000).

Many gun owners took on the positionality of vulnerability both when referencing their existential safety from criminal threats, but also their ability to resist political threats to the right to bear arms. This victimhood position relies on representations of an enemy against which to legitimate a narrative of oppression. Following the election of Donald Trump, gun

owners lost their two favourite representations of liberal power – Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. Michael once told me that "Obama is the best gun-salesman of all time". Studies have shown that during Obama's presidency gun sales actually went up after each mass shooting (Chang 2018) and ultimately gun rights rhetoric relies on powerful symbols of either political or existential danger for gun owners. With a pro-gun president in the Whitehouse, Michael has had to search for new enemies, finding less stable and less well-known figures in the Democratic controlled California state legislature.

Gun culture as a self-aware phenomenon emerged in tandem with opposition to some of the first national gun laws (Melzer 2009). Following the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr and John F Kennedy, congress passed laws to prevent the interstate shipment of guns through unlicensed dealers. This caused a revolt within the National Rifle Association's ranks as hard-line members felt that the organisation should be opposing all new gun control legislation. This group of upstarts gained enough momentum to take over the directorial board at the 1976 annual meeting. It was in the next decade of their leadership that the NRA transformed from an organisation primarily focused on teaching young Americans hunting, fishing, and target shooting skills to the political lobby group that dominates the debate about gun ownership today.

The NRA has attempted to cultivate a more intentional identity around gun ownership in America. This has involved the "othering" of gun control groups in order to allow gun owners to see in their beliefs, ideologies and practices an identity rather what up until that point was simply the lived experience of owning firearms. With the social, civil, and political transformations of the 1960s and 1970s, gun culture emerged as a cornerstone of conservative identity politics and belonging (Kohn 2004).

In just a year and a half, SDCGO has accrued a paying membership base of over 700 gun owners, has helped to defeat two proposed gun regulations prohibiting the construction of gun ranges in the county, supported 18 local candidates for election (11 of whom won), provided voting guides on who to support in elections, and raised over $200,000 for pro-2nd Amendment causes. Michael's long term goal is to have 5000 members by 2020, so that hopeful politicians have to seek out his support if they want to be elected in the county. He also aims to take the model he has built in San Diego and expand to other areas of California. Orange County Gun

Owners and San Bernardino County Gun Owners are just finding their feet and there is currently interest in starting a Los Angeles chapter.

At each monthly meeting Michael invites attendees to stay behind. He is not only trying to create a political movement, but is also trying to build a community of people through friendship and mutual support. In his personal story of financial success that left him ultimately unfulfilled and his discovery of a way in which he could dedicate himself to the defence of a political cause, Michael links a narrative of self to national rights and goals. Although he never served in the military, his positioning of gun rights advocacy as a fight for equality allows him to use the language of oppression in his favour.

Productive Antagonism at Meetings

Despite the emphasis on fairness and equality in its marketing, San Diego County Gun Owners meetings were often combative in tone. Activism was framed as a fight and while I was in San Diego, I saw a "fight" to keep the gun show open, a "fight" to win against Hillary Clinton, a "fight" to defeat proposed gun control legislation in the state assembly, a "fight" for the right to concealed carry in San Diego, and a "fight" to win over San Diego residents. In conceptualising activism in this way, the organisation appeals to San Diegans who have served time in the military and who make up a significant proportion of San Diego County Gun Owner's membership base. Themes of combat and battle also fit into claims that the 2nd amendment represents a constitutionally guaranteed individual right written to maintain a division in the monopoly of violence that ultimately secures a national balance of power. By allowing citizens to wield the means of violence, my interlocutors suggest, citizens are secure from violent attack and the nation is safe from invasion or government tyranny.

There are three SDCGO meetings each month. One in North County, one in Central, or East County, and more recently, one has been added south of the 8 freeway that divides the city of San Diego into affluent north and poor, predominantly Hispanic south. They usually take place in gun shops, putting members in familiar surroundings while allowing these establishments to advertise their goods and services. Meetings are largely recruitment drives, a chance for Michael to show why gun owners should support his organisation. He encourages current members to bring friends each month, advertising meetings through social media and appearing on local radio and television shows. But meetings are also key sites of nationalist production.

They are spaces within which a liberal "other" is constituted that contrasts two images of the nation. Gun shops hang flags and nationalist slogans on every available surface and Michael Schwartz evokes national heroes and ideologies in the way he connects his political activism with a shared history.

Each meeting has a distinct tone that reflects local and national debates, the demographics of the gun owners who attend, and the organisation's momentary activist goals. The first meeting I attended was characterised by a pre-election anxiety and anger from members about an assumed Hillary Clinton victory and new gun control laws in California. Rejection and dead-ends had characterised my initial attempts to find a gun owning community in San Diego, so it was with some nervousness that I entered my first SDCGO meeting at a gun shop in mid-October, 2016 at the invitation of Michael Schwartz.

* * *

I try to walk in confidently beneath the gun shop's logo that reads, "Sheep Dogs Need Sharp Teeth". The first thing I see is a group of men passing around rifles next to a glass fronted cabinet filled with handguns. Around forty people are crowded into the gun shop, bringing with them the autumn heat of Southern California. I take a seat in the back row of temporarily erected folding chairs and spot patriotic posters on the wall that tell customers, "We Proudly Support Our Troops". This theme continues with a SDCGO branded poster that shows the WW2 image of Uncle Sam pointing his index finger declaring, "I Want You San Diego".

Rows of t-shirts hang displaying the black outline of an AR15 rifle with the slogan, "Give Peace a Chance, If That Doesn't Work I've Got You Covered". Military-style jackets, boots, and trousers are draped over every available wall space. Where there are gaps, they are filled with the Stars and Stripes or the symbol of the Libertarian movement, the Gadsden flag, with its curled rattle snake hissing above the words, "Don't Tread On Me". For many gun owners this flag is also a symbol of patriotism. It is said to have been the carried by rebel soldiers during the American Revolutionary Wars (Shapira 2013: 47).

I talk to a man in his early thirties while we wait for the meeting to start. It is also his first time here and as I tell him about my research, he immediately invites me shooting, his eyes lighting up at the prospect of showing me his newly purchased and self-assembled AR15. San Diego County Gun Owners attracted his attention online because he is concerned about new gun laws that are about to come into effect in California. These laws propose restrictions on a gun's magazine capacity to ten rounds, a compulsory ammo registration database, outlaw the loaning of firearms to non-family members, and they will make it illegal not to register AR15 rifles.

Michael Schwartz arrives late, rushing to the front of the room in a flurry of complaints about the traffic. He calls the meeting to order and looks happily surprised at the high turnout. He starts with basic information about San Diego County Gun Owners:

> We work for you, both in public and behind the scenes . . . we are passionate about the 2nd Amendment and believe it gives an individual the right to keep and bear arms . . . We are talking about tradition, about safety. We're the good guys . . . Some people claim they are going to leave California, but the fight is here. This is behind enemy lines.

The idea of doing battle with the enemy in their own territory positions America as a conflicted and divided nation. The crowd receives these images readily, primed by similar rhetoric from their preferred media outlets and a presidential candidate who utilises these tropes. Michael

speaks in the rousing tones of a preacher, expertly layering his speech with personal anecdotes that provoke laughter out of the audience. The rhythm of his speech allows space for members of the audience to call in response, “hell no”, or “hell yeah”, at appropriate moments.

He laments that in California gun enthusiasm is seen as shameful, “I want it to be shameful to admit that you don’t like guns”. The organisation just celebrated its one-year anniversary and Michael boasts that membership is double what he predicted at this point. He says that the movement needs gun owners to engage in direct political action in the three weeks left until the 2016 election, especially on neighbourhood walks, “All you have to do is pick the houses with an American flag outside, they tend to be Republicans. Or even better, a Gadsden flag!”

Michael opens the meeting up to questions after he has given his pitch and seems perpetually curious about how his audience heard about the organisation. Many in the crowd say they had been looking for pro-firearm groups because of the new gun laws coming into effect, an event that one member refers to as “Gunmaggedon”. A man sitting to my left who has been nervously tapping his foot throughout the meeting suddenly stands up. He looks upset and his voice breaks as he says, “I came [to this meeting] for some hope . . . [he pauses to steady his voice] . . . I didn’t get hope. I think California is falling on its own sword”. There are tears in his eyes as he goes on to explain that he is thinking of moving to Arizona to escape new regulations, “I’m a family man, but I don’t know how I can protect my family here without becoming a criminal. There’s no shame in a tactical retreat”.

Some of the crowd mutter and boo this final statement while Michael restores order by waving his arms up and down. Along with his ability to weave stories into his arguments for the value of gun ownership, Michael’s capacity to listen seems to be one the reasons he makes such an impact on people. He probes further into this man’s complaints, giving sympathetic advice, trying to understand where his distress is coming from before mounting an argument for why gun owners should not leave California:

> What starts in California, it’s gonna start spreading east. And so I say to people in Arizona and Nevada, if you don’t want to fight this in your own backyard, you better support us. Did George Washington or Thomas Jefferson move away from the fight? No!

Michael often suggests that what happens with gun rights in California can be read as an indication of what will happen nationwide echoing a popular trope within American scholarship and imagination that suggests that the state acts as a testing ground for future trends in the nation (Gentry 1968). For gun owners this is a bleak, but ultimately motivating factor in their engagement with activism to try to reverse the trend towards stricter legislation on firearms within the state.

I hear many audience members refer to liberals as, "weasels", "jackasses", and "communists". One member worries that, "we're gonna wake up one day and no-one has guns". A moment of awkwardness occurs when one man uses Hillary Clinton's campaign slogan, "we have to remember that gun owners are *stronger together*". In the embarrassed silence that follows and realising his mistake, he clarifies "well, that's *their* words, but you know what I mean". A man at the back of the room in a cowboy hat mutters to a group of us that the prospect of a second Clinton Presidency could lead to Civil War and someone responds with "hell yeah".

In October of 2016, gun owners seemed to grudgingly accept that Hillary Clinton was going to be the next President of the United States. At this first meeting people were scared by that prospect, believing their friends and preferred media outlets that one of her main goals was to abolish the 2nd Amendment. This meeting was coloured by a sense of urgency, paranoia, and anger that Michael channelled into new activists and paying members. This was primarily achieved by positioning liberals as "others" who represent a fundamental threat to the nation. Audience members predisposed towards this point of view would echo this technique in statements like, "we have to keep taking the high road. We have truth on our side. They [liberals] have emotions".

Emotion was often wielded as an insult by gun owners. Gun control advocates were conceptualised as motivated by fear and therefore their ideas about firearms could not be trusted. Gun owners believed that their side held the high ground because they had "reason" and "facts", concepts that were deployed stylistically to juxtapose with the image of the emotion-governed, even hysterical, liberal gun control activist. The gendered dimensions to these critiques come into focus when gun owners would talk about one of the largest gun control groups in San Diego, *Moms Demand Action Against Gun Violence*, who took part in regular marches across the county in distinctive orange t-shirts.

At a meeting in January, Michael was quick to exploit the national woman's march as a way of emphasising the "right ways" to get involved in politics. He compared his organisation's approach to that of the protest, "Thousands of women marched Saturday, right. And what's different today?", someone in the crowd called out, "Nothing!", Michael responded, "Exactly. Absolutely nothing. They can march all day, but Donald Trump is still president". He went on to say that he doesn't want to disrupt people's lives because his members are "hardworking Americans who don't have time to protest. You have responsibilities. Families to look after. Businesses to run". He creates an image of gun owners as responsible, hardworking citizens and opposes this to an implied under-employed, lazy, and feminine liberal population.

The feminized image of gun control activism has been documented by scholars who show the ways in which motherhood is mobilized strategically to lend a cultural legitimacy through the powerful signifier of protective femininity (White 2017). However, this has allowed gun owners and right-wing activists more generally to criticise women, suggesting that it is their very participation in politics (and the neglect of their duties as mothers) that is creating the kind of disenfranchised youth who perpetrate gun violence in the first place (White 2017: 165). This is a catch-22 of gender stereotyping that explains away female protestors with tropes of the overly emotional or hysterical woman. It is applied to liberals more generally, and is used as an example of the feminisation of America by my interlocutors. Like Donald Trump's bullish rhetoric, gun rights activism offers an alternative image to post-modern masculinity, renewing associations between gendered roles, patriotism, gun ownership, and protective violence.

However, this appeal to more traditional and hegemonic forms of masculinity is not just restricted to men. Female gun owners are cast in the image of violent masculinity. Pistol packing mothers willing to defend their children with deadly defensive tools are positioned as true representations of femininity, backed up by a proposed inherent vulnerability. In the next section I take a closer look at how female gun owners conceive of defensive gun ownership and how they take on, re-mould, and innovate with historically masculine ideals of behaviour.

"Gun Rights Are Women's Rights"

Michael's speech at the annual 2nd amendment celebration dinner continued to emphasize the different roles that he believes firearms can play in personal, community, and national defence using a rhetoric that is often associated with the language of human and civil rights:

> [A gun] is not just a tool we can hunt with, go to the range with. That's not really what the 2nd amendment is about. This is truly a civil rights issue. This is the way we protect ourselves, our dignity, our families. This is a very patriotic issue, it's the way we may have to protect our country and our neighbourhoods. I think far too often we fall back on statistics and we want to come up with an explanation or logic, [but] we really need to bring out the emotional side of this. For most of human history, the biggest meanest, strongest guy in the village got to do whatever he wanted, right. It's only been the last 150 years or so with the invention of the firearm that a 90-pound disabled woman can defend her life and her dignity against a Mixed Martial Arts, weightlifting, Navy Seal . . . I don't think that it's a coincidence that during that time we have seen a country emerge based around individual rights and self-government. In that period, we have seen the expansion of rights for minorities, the LGBT community, women. Just 150 years, we're equal to everyone else out there, what a luxury, what a privilege.

I heard variations of this speech at a number of events during my fieldwork. In Michael's view, the choice to own and carry a gun in public can be an ethical commitment to promoting equality and protecting the vulnerable in a world seen as increasingly dangerous. A choice that he claims has led to the innovations that make America great. This draws links between the personal means of violence and equality, diversity, and national success. His suggestion that gun owners should lean more heavily on emotional arguments for the defensive benefits of firearms contrasts with his member's criticisms of the emotional tone of liberal gun control messaging. However, it highlights Michael's awareness of the power of personal testament and narrative to change people's minds. The stories that gun owners tell about using a gun in self-defence to counter perceptions of embodied vulnerability are powerful political tools. This is most obvious in the ways in which a stereotypical construction of feminine vulnerability is deployed within activist rhetoric.

Hegemonic masculinities become tied to gun use through mythologies of the frontier that tie violence to gender identity (Connel 2005; Burbick 2006; O'Neill 2007; Melzer 2009; Stroud 2012). However, white, masculine identity can become dislocated from male bodies. As women and non-binary gun enthusiasts take on the embodied, ethical, and ideological dispositions of carrying a firearm in public, they sometimes reaffirm and sometimes challenge these hegemonic constructions. Over the last two decades the National Rifle Association

(NRA), shooting ranges, and firearms manufacturers have increasingly tried to recruit female members by promoting women-only tournaments and designing 'female friendly' pink firearms marketed directly at women (Smith & Smith 1995; Carlson 2014a). The women I met in gun rights activist communities expressed concerns that they were at a disproportionate risk of being attacked by men and draw on their own experiences of threat when assessing their likelihood of being assaulted.

In November, 2018 I attended a talk at a university in San Diego called "Gun Rights Are Women's Rights". Organised by a campus chapter of a right wing media company, this event brought together four young women who have quickly become famous in the gun rights world for the young, diverse voice that they bring to gun ownership. The first speaker was Maria, the director of Hispanic engagement for a media company with ten years of experience in the US military. She told the crowd that she was convinced of the need for women to protect themselves after she was sexually assaulted on a college campus. She told her story in stark detail, linking her commitment to training with a gun to getting over fears that this experience had generated:

> I know what it is like to be in the most vulnerable position imaginable. Perpetrators are evil, women need preventative measures. Modern feminism is full of shit, feminism has no desire to empower women . . . it keeps women victims.

The crowd cheered as she passed the microphone to an African-American woman on the panel who built on this criticism of modern feminism by saying, "#metoo makes women into victims. It should be #neveragain . . . we have a right to choose how to defend ourselves . . . Learn how to shoot your rapist".

The four panellists directly addressed young women in the audience who were encouraged to speak before men in an open question section at the end. They evoked the sympathies of a predominantly conservative audience who might otherwise hold sceptical attitudes towards woman's personal testimonies of abuse. Gun owners were able to hear those stories because they were framed in a way that confirmed their deeply held commitment to firearms as tools of empowerment rather than oppression. Just as the #metoo movement focuses on the power of personal testimony to call out abusers, these conservative women's stories were privileged and rendered important in the space afforded for their telling. However, a liberal approach to

protecting women acts as a reflection of conservative defensive tools. The former in many ways constitutes the latter.

This event utilised key ideas that might be associated with left-wing women's rights rhetoric – female empowerment, the "right to choose", a proposed method of preventing sexual harassment, and strong female role models. Yet they were being used to argue the case for a deeply conservative issue. Their personal testimonies of abuse set the event apart from the pro-gun meetings already discussed, where men would draw their defences of gun ownership from the past (in historical accounts that positioned gun ownership as an American tradition) or the future (in imagined scenarios of danger or revolution). The real experiences of threat that these women related added urgency and emotional valence to arguments for gun ownership by mobilising a notion of embodied vulnerability, signified by an increased risk of sexual assault and other forms of violent crime.

In her work on NRA messaging, Carlson (2014a) argues that gun rights advocacy groups project a particularly masculine experience of crime onto women and non-binary communities, ignoring the ways that they actually encounter violence:

> "Although gun carriers may actively promote guns for women, they assume a particular understanding of crime that reproduces masculine privilege by emphasizing fast, warlike violence perpetrated by strangers – the kinds of crime men, as opposed to women, are more likely to face", *Carlson 2014a: 61*

In the United States, men are almost twice as likely to be victimized by a stranger than women (Catalano 2007) and are more likely to be murdered (Cooper and Smith 2011). On the other hand, women are both less likely to commit a crime and more likely to suffer intimate partner violence. One in three women report having experienced sexual assault and other forms of violent attack, the vast majority of which are perpetrated by someone they know (Black et al. 2011). This shows that experiences of violent crime vary by gender, but they also vary by race and ethnicity.

Carlson suggests that gun rights groups have targeted predominantly white, middle class women, while forgetting about working class women of colour who are unable to use a firearm in self-defence for fear of being mistaken as the perpetrator (Browder 2008). The right to use

a gun in self-defence may not apply to all equally. The way that women can legally defend their lives is constrained by the histories of racial prejudice and unequal enforcement of the right to self-defence. As countless examples show, working class men, women, and non-binary people of colour are least likely to be able to exercise the right to defend their lives with firearms as they encounter a less responsive and often overtly hostile, justice system (Carlson 2014a). By positioning firearms as equalisers in defending against criminal violence, gun rights organisations challenge stereotypes about their attitudes towards women and minorities while asserting a kind of "colour-blind racism" that fails to acknowledge different lived experiences of crime on the basis of race, gender, and class (Carlson 2014b). While promoting firearms as tools of empowerment, the NRA has actually opposed laws that would prevent suspected domestic abusers from having legal access to firearms (Carlson 2014b: 60).

However, these critiques do not account for the subjective effects of carrying a gun. My interlocutors claim that arming gives them an embodied sense of safety. Many of the women I got to know first bought weapons to protect themselves from abusive partners, landlords, or co-workers. Some were followed by strangers or, in one case, even kidnapped. Their experiences of fear and suffering led to a desire to ensure that they would be able to protect themselves if they were put in those positions again. While there is an important contradiction in the way gun rights organisations conceptualise crime from a masculine perspective, it is in the accompanying sense of mastery over threat that some women and trans shooters find comfort in carrying guns.

The rhetoric of gun rights advocacy provides a structuring narrative that places meaning onto their experiences of violence and shows that they have the ability to prepare for future attacks. With this new way of imaging the future they find a practical method of training their bodies to meet threats to their physical safety. This utilizes masculine experiences of crime to articulate experiences of gendered vulnerability that they claim have been countered by training with a firearm. These arguments create a new "safe" body, emphasising a kind of invulnerability that accompanies carrying a firearm. Like Michael, female gun owners find purpose and meaning in training to defend themselves with a firearm and in gun rights activism. They do so by contrasting their own values and practices against liberal approaches to defending women from the kind of threats that exist in society from dangerous others. It seems that for men and women, boundary work and the closeness of death are central in creating a sense of embodied invulnerability.

Sites of Nationalist Production

> *"The fight for gun ownership is deeply patriotic. They didn't write the 2nd amendment for deer hunting, they wrote it for killing senators if it comes down to that"*, Jack Flynn, middle-aged, white gun owner.

When it comes to a sense of national pride, this gun rights activist community has it in abundance. To these gun owners, America's national identity is self-evident - its symbols are everywhere in San Diego. So why do they feel the need to assert its existence and superiority at every turn? Is there an insecurity that underrides this claim to identity? America is not a thing one can grasp, rather it is a set of contested symbols, practices, and ideologies that construct an abstract, but geo-politically meaningful entity. America becomes real in the temporally and spatially situated contexts in which it is narrativised within social groups and public events (Spencer 1990: 284).

Representations of the past are crucial in imagining the nation as an unchanging set of experiences and values (Anderson 2006 [1983]). This past can be used to cement belonging within an inevitably complex, ever-changing present, as well as an unknowable future of potential decline. Plastering symbols of national identity and superiority on every gun shop wall, embedding the words and rituals within gun owning practices, and by tying the act of using a gun to the nation, gun owners effectively essentialise an identity as Americans. Belonging within a national community is created through boundary work – both within public political discourse, but also in individual minds that make distinctions between self and other, us and them to create group identifications (Yuval-Davis, Kannabiran, & Vieten 2006: 3). Gun owners do this by constructing powerful enemies in liberal politicians and local gun control activists.

Much has been written about the resurgence of white nationalism in the United States (Song 2010; Shapira 2013; White 2017). Concepts of masculinity and whiteness intersect with projects of nationalism and nation building (Nagel 1998). Conservatives and liberals alike compete in turbulent public debates to deploy symbols and narratives of American history that provide a template for a contemporary imagined community (Anderson 1983). Cynthia Enloe (1990: 45) argues that nationalism is typically framed around masculinized memories and

hopes. Projects of state power, citizenship, nationalism, militarism, revolution, and democracy are best understood as masculine projects (Connel 1995). The scripts for roles within the nation are written primarily by men, for men, about men (Nagel 1998). According to those scripts, women take on supporting symbolic roles as either icons of nationhood or defenceless victims who require the protection of men.

Nationalists are often created within lives defined by individual uncertainty (Spencer 1990: 287). This is particularly urgent for the historically dominant white men who make up the majority of this gun rights organisation, who in their own perceptions of aging and complaints about the pace of technological and socio-demographic change seek out proof of the value of their roles as fathers, husbands, citizens, and political actors. Trying to make sense of his role within a nation constituted by multiple experiences of cultural diversity, Michael uses salient metaphors of individual success that allow him to find a purpose through activist work, evoking nationalist ideals about how a self is constructed through hard work, individual sacrifice, and a dedication to principles. This places a coherent narrative over Michael's very human perception of a changing world.

Donald Trump explains an unnerving and changing world by telling people that they are right to feel hard-done-by. That their perceptions of victimhood are justified and that powerful forces are at work against them. He points at Democrats, immigrants, and historically meaningful ethnic others within the nation as the culprits, folding into this a critique of transnational capitalist alliances that promotes distrust of any political actor outside of the United States. He imagines a renewed nation, made great again in the image of the golden years of many of his supporters. These ideas engage in a "politics of belonging" (Yuval-Davis, Kannabiran, & Vieten 2006) that seeks to respond to contemporary challenges posed to national identity by globalisation, mass immigration, a geographically fragmented and automating work force, and new possibilities of forming non-local communities and identities that have been opened up by the internet.

A Gun to "Win Back the West"

Rapturous applause follows Michael's exposition about the safety promoting, freedom securing, and equality producing effects of private firearms ownership at the 2nd amendment celebration dinner. This moment is the culmination of his speech and of a year of activist work.

He thanks the crowd, but before he can leave the stage a SDCGO board member called Gary walks up to him and takes hold of the microphone. He says that the board has purchased a gift for Michael to honour his effort and hard work over the past year. Handing a package to Michael he says, "We wanted to get you a gift that means something. It's a Colt single action army. The gun that won the West".

The gift of this particular model of gun is significant for a number of reasons. The firearms designed and manufactured by Samuel Colt's company were used by the US military from 1873 up until 1986 when it was replaced by Beretta. Colts have accrued a historical association with military service, an image the company draws on in their advertising to the civilian population (Gibson 1994, see figure 4). The Colt single action revolver was also wielded by a number of American folk-heroes, including Buffalo Bill Cody and Theodore Roosevelt (White and Limerick 1994), and was the weapon of choice for the characters portrayed by John Wayne in many of his films (Spangenberger 2016). It was even the subject of an entire movie called *Colt .45,* about the introduction of the weapon to the Frontier in the 1800s (Marin 1950). William Gibson suggests that "to own a Colt .45 revolver is to possess a 'time travel' machine, an object so laden with rich historical associations that it can transport its owner back to the mythic frontier" (1994: 85).

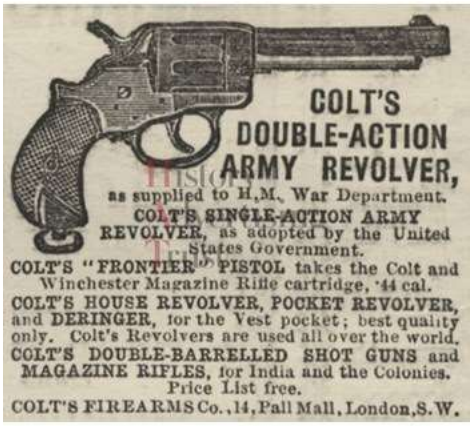


Figure 4

The gun is popularly seen as a technological innovation that handed European colonists an advantage in carving out the Western territories of the United States. This object is thus implicated in the genocide of indigenous people, but also in national expansionist projects, conquest, and military power. Gary's use of the phrase, "the gun that won the west", evokes this historical drama and links the contemporary struggle of gun owners in liberal California to

violent wars that occurred in America's past. To own such a weapon associates the wielder with modern right-wing interpretations of American history that bring together normative gendered frameworks for behaviour, national identity, and the legitimation of the use of violence to secure one's personal, familial, and community security. The process of othering that my interlocutors engage in when imagining threats to national security from immigration or to personal safety from liberals who want to ban the private ownership of guns plays a key role in motivating gun owners and in constituting a local community of activists.

Michael weaves national themes of personal success, self-discovery, and ethical commitment into the story he tells himself (and me) about his life. A nationally salient narrative of meaning serves as a scaffolding for his identity. His success also proves his own ideas that America is the greatest, freest nation on Earth. Beaming at the crowd while holding the Colt in his hands, Michael leans into the microphone to use a popular phrase among this group of Americans, "God created man, but Sam Colt made them equal". The crowd erupts into whoops and cheers. Gary builds on the ecstatic atmosphere, pointing at the firearm and declaring, "this is the gun that will win back the West".

Conclusion

In this chapter I have sketched out a portrait of a gun rights activist group that I spent time with in San Diego, highlighting the important events that make up their annual political activities as well as showing how Michael Schwartz came to inhabit the role and identity of founder of San Diego County Gun Owners. My interlocutors conceptualise firearms as tools of self-defence. They claim that their lives are stalked by pervasive threats, but in the process of training to meet these threats they find purpose in the role of protecting their immediate family or social group, but also their nation. This securely cements men, but also women and non-binary gun owners, within a role in their communities, families, and country. Purpose emerges from fear of imagined violence, giving an embodied salience to the precarity of human existence that has the power to form deep bonds of connection between activists.

These gun owning Americans strategically deploy the notion of embodied vulnerability to argue for the benefits of using a gun in self-defence. This "politics of vulnerability" (Carlson 2014b) constructs a category of existential insecurity or victimhood which allows gun owners to claim an enhanced need for defensive weaponry. My interlocutors explicitly tie gun rights

to America and national superiority. The self can be made distinctly "American" in narratives of gun use and in this process the nation is imagined in new and dynamic ways in dialogue with a physical practice that acts out historical dramas. I explore this process further in chapter two as I discuss the ways in which masculinity, gun use, and conceptualisations of America have been tied together through both fictional and historical representation, as well as through embodied participation in historical re-enactment sports like Cowboy Action Shooting.

Chapter. 2

Living American Myths

Introduction

> "The boundary is permeable between tool and myth, instrument and concept, historical systems of social relations and historical anatomies of possible bodies, including objects of knowledge. Indeed, myth and tool mutually constitute each other", Donna Haraway, 1985, 33.

> "The American colonial needed guns to survive and got very skilled with them . . . it was a given that you needed to be able to protect yourself, it was a given that you needed to be able to stand for yourself and demand your God given rights. And, the fact that the only reason the United States became the United States is because we had the ability to defend ourselves against tyranny . . . but you know the whole history of the United States is a little bit about gun control . . . we recognise as a legacy of the forming of our country that we had to fight a war hugely outnumbered . . . it started with people bringing their own guns to a battle", Joan, SDCGO Member.

In this chapter, I explore how gun rights activists draw on nationally salient images and myths from America's past to legitimise demands for increased access to firearms. In linking contemporary gun ownership to important national moments, heroic figures and documents like the 2nd amendment, my interlocutors suggest that firearms have been a wholesome part of

American life from its inception, essential for self-defence and community survival. They look to historical representations of masculinity in the mythical figures of men who lived individualistic, violent forms of existence at the frontier of national expansion. These myths dramatise relationships of gender, race, and nationalism, which animate the practice of shooting a gun with social meaning. This embodied set of skills allows a visceral engagement with America's past that compels my informants to participate in gun rights activism in organisations like San Diego County Gun Owners.

Ethnographers of American gun culture (Kohn 2004; Springwood 2007; 2014) have shown that literature and popular representations of frontier mythologies are important to gun owners. Elements of popular culture like films, novels, and TV shows comprise a number of artefacts of a society's history that are both "based on reality or fiction, and create realities and fictions" (Rinehart 2007: 19). The pervasive presence of guns in film and television media suggest that they play important roles in the stories that Americans tell about themselves (Arjet 2007; Cox 2007).

Here I show how my male interlocutors construct a coherent sense of self through masculine archetypes that change over time, but reference a history of popular gender theorising and practise. I found it difficult to elicit explicit statements about male roles and identity from gun owning men, but they often spoke of the importance of their position as wielders of violence in the defence of women or the nation, providing an insight into their conceptions of an ideal masculinity, or "good guy" subject position. They referenced the "good guy" as a self-evident category, encompassing all men who can be trusted with a firearm. This historically salient hero is important to my informants who cultivate an ethical subjectivity defined by such a role model (discussed further in chapter four). I aim to show how the "good guy" emerges in particular discourses about family, gender, race, and nation.

Richard Slotkin (1973: 3) explores how the United States developed an image of itself in newly developed forms of print and screen media. Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, and media reproductions of frontier heroes like Buffalo Bill set out to capture the settings, lifestyles, and ideologies of a young nation. In the process, this created a sense of distance from the colonist's shared European pasts and provided stories that reflected the unique experience of life in America from their perspective. Slotkin suggests that in the 19th century scholars of the frontier, such as Frederick Jackson Turner reproduced and reinterpreted myths rather than analysing

them. I share a concern that by engaging with myth as an analytical category I may be complicit in this reproduction process (Spencer 1990), but by deconstructing contemporary understandings of the "good guy" among my informants, I aim to show how hero mythologies are salient within people's lives and how they are lived out in personal narratives of self. I have chosen this particular analytical path because my informants often referenced historical heroes and enemies in their justifications for gun ownership.

Myths are powerful stories that echo through generations of a particular group of people, helping to form their sense of collective identity. "Myths reach out of the past to cripple, incapacitate, or strike down the living" (Slotkin 1973: 5), providing models for particular ideologies and behaviours in stories of heroes who utilised firearms to defend society from enemies. Gibson (1994) claims that America has always had a place for a warrior mythology. The story of the lone gunman who works alone, or with a small band of like-minded warriors to put the world right through acts of violence has been around since the Revolutionary era (1994: 17). It continued in the image of the frontiersman fighting in the Indian Wars to carve out territory in a landscape represented as empty, in the brutality of the Civil War, and the many international conflicts that define important moments in American history such as the Vietnam War.

James Baldwin has written that it is in the histories of oppression, conquest, and genocide that white identity finds its birth (1995). This legitimizes claims to ownership of and belonging to a land that was won in a genocide of native peoples who act as mythological representations of savagery to contrast with the civilising impact of an inherited European culture (Slotkin 1973). Making monsters out of non-white populations turns them into sources of terror, placing them outside of the category of humans (either victims or good guys), but can also makes them into legitimate "targets of terrifying violence" (Fernando, 2018).

Several dichotomies recur throughout this chapter that are worth reflecting on. Gun owners often justified their access to firearms in terms of good vs evil, civilisation vs savagery, order vs disorder, and masculinity vs femininity. Although my data complicates these distinctions in other chapters, here I want to look at how these binaries construct a mythological universe that defines an ethical understanding of a gun owner's right to legitimately wield the means of violence to protect society from threats.

I delve into the historical depth of these masculine archetypes and show how they are embodied through gun use, but also how they link to the contemporary political moment as Donald Trump draws on these historical narratives in his rhetoric and performance. My interlocutors often nostalgically complained that America is not what it used to be. This would often be accompanied by complaints about feminism, the Black Lives Matter movement, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. Each represents a historically salient threat to the character traits and behaviours that construct masculinity, whiteness, and belonging to the nation. Modern representations of frontier warrior mythology seemed to have a direct impact on my male informants who spoke of their love of Hollywood action films because of their depiction of violent, but ethically reflective heroes.

I take a broader analytical approach than in other chapters in order to fill in conceptual and historical gaps that exist in my empirical data. I illustrate these links by showing how my informants talk about and engage with historical re-enactment shooting events that utilise fictional representations of the past to tell an ethical story about gun use. Through a description of the historical re-enactment sport Cowboy Action Shooting I look at how myths are made real through embodied participation in a fictional past**.** I then move on to how contemporary fictional reinterpretations and adaptations of these myths are important in shaping a coherent sense of self for my informants, but also how these movies and novels help to shape attitudes towards those they see as dangerous to society. Historically salient narratives of race play a role in this process, echoing down the ages and manifesting themselves in contemporary anxieties about personal, community, and national safety. Finally, I explore what it looks like when a gun owning man fails to live up to the standards of historical exemplary masculinity and how this impacts on his sense of purpose.

American Warriors

There are detailed accounts of the development of American mythology (Slotkin 1973) and its link to contemporary masculinity (Jeffords 1989; Gibson 1994; Cox 2007). Richard Slotkin argues that there is a distinctly American mythology of the frontier that still animates public life in the United States. It is an image of America as, "a wide-open land of unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious self-reliant individual to thrust his way to the top" (1973: 5).

These myths are invoked by engaging in shooting practices. The connection between past and present is most obvious in Cowboy Action Shooting - a historical role playing sport that emerged in southern California in the 1980s, but which has become an international phenomenon (Kohn 2014). In her ethnography of a Cowboy Action Shooting team in northern California, Kohn (2014: 44) claims that the sport presents a vision of an idealised frontier past made up of white, middle-class good guys who share similar values. The costumes and practices of the sport draw on both realistic and fictional interpretations of the frontier.

The rural shooting ranges across San Diego county where these events take place bring together men and some women who share an interest in America's frontier past. The participants dress up as their favourite cowboy heroes from the past and I always felt highly visible in jeans and a t-shirt among a crowd of men dressed in elaborate cowboy regalia. Driving towards these rural shooting ranges from the city, I passed ranches, stables, and tiny farming communities. There are few signs of the kind of urban life that most southern Californian's are used to. But this reflects something about American history; while the frontier expansionist life of mythology was real, it was experienced by a mere 10% of the population (Menell 2007). Historically the vast majority of US citizens have been born and raised in towns and cities (Ibid 2007). Despite this, the frontier wilderness takes on an important mythological functions within a shared sense of what it means to be American.

Each Cowboy Action Shooting match starts with a story that merges historical fact and fiction. The organisers of the competition gather shooters together at the start of the day to set the scene of the imaginary gun fights that are about to occur. Participants are encouraged to put themselves into the shoes of a historical dilemma relevant to the frontier. At one match I attended, the story revolved around the "robbery of the Butterfield Stagecoach outside of Bisbee, Arizona by the gang led by Ben Wade and Charlie Prince". These criminals were said to be spending their stolen gold at a local tavern. The heroes of this story (the gathered men) had to complete the shooting challenges to simulate hunting down and duelling with these bad guys. As each man prepared to shoot he indicated that he was ready to begin by shouting a line of dialogue relevant to each scenario that advanced the story. Samples from the story of Ben Wade and Charlie Prince include, "you cheating SOB, this will teach you to deal from the bottom of the deck", and, "those townies seem a bit touchy".

This mixture of story-telling with performative shooting gives the participants the opportunity to embody heroes of America's past. In these stories the warriors of the frontier are loveable rogues, rough around the edges but ultimately fighting for good. One man in an immaculate outfit suggested that he admires cowboys for their quiet stoicism and strength, qualities that he claimed were often associated with Native Americans at the time and which were the mark of a skilful warrior. This is an expression of the archetypical warrior hero who takes on qualities of the enemy, accepting the necessity of wielding the means of violence briefly to defend his community or established social order. His enthusiasm for history enhances his enjoyment of the sport he said, but "there is nothing like being able to put yourself in their shoes, wear their clothes, and shoot their weapons". He said that he wished men were more like these historical figures and less like the young liberal men who live in coastal cities. After I mentioned that I lived in central San Diego, he shook his head topped with an impressively wide hat, his spurs jingled as he shifted his weight and sighed, "the city just isn't real life boy, you want to get out here more, into the wilderness, this is real life".

At these events performance and genuine political sentiment were indistinguishable. I met one man who wore clothes and shot guns that were used by John Wayne's characters in his western movies. Stetson hats, chaps, spurs, boots, facial hair, and engraved leather belts are made in the styles of the time and participants take a great deal of pride in self-sufficiency. Men boast about cutting and treating their own leather ammo belts or designing hats and hunting knives. The atmosphere at these matches is sociable as they compare outfits, discuss shooting techniques, joke around, and share political opinions. Some strive for realism, making their costumes using traditional tools and methods, and in one case, going so far as to spend weeks at a time living off the land in the style of a frontiersman in the 19th century. This re-enactment sporting context allows these men to bond in an environment that holds a historical and cultural salience. The sensory experience of shooting becomes intertwined with that myth, adding a personal dimension to historical awareness, tying the defence of the right to own a gun to defence of a vision of what America is.

A New Crisis in American Masculinity

While I am not the first person to draw the link between gun ownership and masculinity (Stange and Oyster 2000; Kohn 2004; Arjet 2007; Cox 2007; King 2007), my research complicates this seemingly obvious relationship. The presence of women at San Diego County Gun Owners

events is not only accepted, but encouraged and national survey data suggest that women are the fastest growing demographic in rates of gun ownership (Smith & Smith 1995). The increasing acceptance of the LGBT community suggests that attitudes are shifting to fit in with the liberal and diverse surroundings of California (this will be discussed further in chapters three and four). However, 85% of the membership of SDCGO are men and thus it seems appropriate to investigate the associations between gun ownership and masculinity in this ethnographic context.

Sociologist R. Connell (1995) suggests that in societies that have developed social and political institutions that privilege particular groups of men, there is rarely a need to explicitly articulate and organise around male interests. Historically, moments of crisis that have produced political defences of masculinity in the United States have often been framed in terms of concerns about national security, corporate profit, family values, and individual freedom (Connell 1995: 213). They may emerge from a moment in which traditional male sex roles are questioned, thus producing a time of uncertainty (Lemon 2017). Gramsci (1971: 276) suggests that these moments of crisis represent rare opportunities to think outside of, and question, dominant ideological forms which appear natural due to their overwhelming cultural presence. This does not mean that there are easily definable or singular ideologies in any given social group or larger population, but that there are ever-changing and dominant ways of being in the world that reflect wider structures that give people differential access to power and a voice within the culture.

The problem with the idea of masculinity in crisis is that it takes for granted the object of analysis, reinforcing assumptions that gender categories are binary and universal. The notion that masculinity is a natural, unchanging category that entails specific behaviours is relatively unique to modern European and American gender systems. To discuss masculinity at all entails "doing gender in a culturally specific way" (Connell 1995: 68). In this chapter I treat masculinity as a "gender project" (Connell 1995: 72), always impartially and multiply constituted through the interaction of cultural archetypes, embodied, intersubjective experience, and social context. Masculinity, femininity, and other gendered identities exist in a relational field and are constitutive of a coherent sense of self. Gender, "is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality, and culture" (Connell 1995: 71).

My gun owning interlocutors sculpt their gendered identities from the practices, ideological orientations, and discourses that have been present throughout their lives. Many rifle organisations were initially formed and marketed themselves as ways for men to develop the manly ideals of mental alertness, competitiveness, and physical fitness (Mechling 2014). These associations allow men to place themselves within a "good guy" subject position by weaving together aspects of personal experience, cultural expectation, and historical consciousness. This constitutes an aspect of what might be called "hegemonic masculinity" (Stroud 2012), that links the defensive use of firearms to success as a man. There are many different overlapping qualities that can lead one to identify with forms of hegemonic masculinity, but clearly whiteness is one important marker of belonging in this category in the United States (2012: 231).

Hegemonic masculinity is made in practices (Myketiak 2016) and I argue that the predominantly male spaces in which my interlocutors use guns shows the way in which men live out fantasies of domination through training with a weapon. In an analysis of mass shooter manifestos, Myketiak (2016: 292) shows the way in which violent fantasies blend racial and gendered stereotypes to create a world of loss for the deserving white man. White nationalists have often utilised indigenous imagery to appropriate narratives of victimhood and vulnerability (Goodluck 2019). Whether in Norway, Germany, or the United States, mass shooters consistently claim to be fighting for a rightful ownership of the land using symbols of indigenous suffering. By positioning themselves as belonging to the land, white Americans can become victims in an attempted overthrow by non-white others.

This shows a kind of fragility to masculinity, in which belonging within a hegemonic category is contestable by those who might also claim to belong in such a space. As I will show in chapter five, men often use jokes and call in to question another man's masculinity when competing in shooting competitions. Hegemonic masculinity does not rest directly on violence, rather it relies on successful claims to authority - violence is one way of enforcing this. Claims to authority also imply a relational understanding of one's position in relation to non-male and non-white identities against which a hierarchy can be designed.

In order to understand this, it is also useful to think about how women appear in the biographies of my male interlocutors, often inhabiting roles as nervous, over-protective mothers who might try to get in the way of the bond between a father and son. Or, they are portrayed as innocent

wives, girlfriends, and daughters who require protection, thus giving these men an important role in providing security for a family. Through a discussion of the kinds of discourses, communities, and practices that gun owning men engage in, I want to show how a uniquely American warrior mythology is produced that legitimises concerns that society is a dangerous place which requires a man to be ready for violence whenever necessary. By protecting his life, his family, and his property from those who would do him harm, he is echoing stories told about America's past in novels, scholarship, and movies.

Crises in masculinity have resulted from shifts in labour markets away from unskilled labour and towards technical, white collar employment (White 2017), changing attitudes towards immigration (Connell 1995: 55), military failure in Vietnam (Jeffords 1989: Gibson 1994; Sturken 1997), and the rise of the Civil Rights movement which drew attention to issues of gender inequality and the rights of racial and ethnic minorities in the United States (Painter 2010; White 2017: 32 – 34). Given the turbulence surrounding the election and continuing presidency of Donald Trump, I want to question whether the present moment might represent a new crisis of masculinity that is being fought (potentially literally) on every front by the conservative men that I spent time with.

Perceived shifts in economic and social demographics in the United States produce a sense of disenfranchisement from, and nostalgia for, a particular historical interpretation of American values. Enemies within (liberals, feminists, Black Lives Matter, etc.) distract the gun owning warrior from the more dangerous evils that encroach from outside. Liberals who want them to give up their guns will misguidedly leave America vulnerable to these enemies. Islamic terrorism and high levels of immigration are said to threaten the very fabric of American life. Donald Trump has drawn heavily on this imagery in his rhetoric, calling for a ban on immigration from Muslim countries and for a wall on the US-Mexico border. His inauguration speech in January of 2017 painted an image of a broken social order; a nation of drug dealers, addicts, criminal immigrants, and other dangerous bad guys who need to be locked away (NPR 2017).

This vision of the world appealed to gun owners who spend much of their time learning to shoot potential enemies who may harm their families and communities. Trump gave many gun owners a political movement based around their embodied fantasies of defending themselves - and America - from bad guys. Many political pundits (Moore 2016; Zakaria 2017) see his

victory as a backlash against progressive civil rights movements by an angry, working-class voting block who feel excluded from national discourse.

Song (2010) claims that anthropologists often attribute historical depth to contemporary ideologies and practices that they observe, assuming a continuity with the past. A better analysis should start by asking how the past is evoked in the present for particular purposes. Stewart (1996) effectively does just this in her ethnography of a rural ex-coal mining district in Appalachian West Virginia. She suggests her ethnographic setting represents a "space on the side of the road" of national history, giving specificity and location to myth, allowing a researcher to investigate how people engage with archetypical historical narratives at a local level. In Appalachia, the stories of Western expansion, conquest, and the triumph of the hero over savagery hold just as strongly, but they are invoked by objects - the American flag on the porch, the photo of Ronald Regan on the mantelpiece, the gun in their closet (1996: 3).

I argue that firearms (both as unique objects to each individual and a larger symbolic or abstract carrier of significance) are aspects of American life that have become charged with important meaning in the passage of time. They can construct a sense of self and embodied connection to an imagined national community through the practices of gun ownership**.** Investigating how "America" is produced in specific contexts opens "a gap in the order of myth itself" (Stewart 1996: 3) where a master narrative can be reaffirmed, challenged or ignored. It is a gap in which America can talk back. Here, master narratives come into contact with the constantly remembered past that is deployed in narratives, spaces, and objects (1996: 93).

Hero Mythology in the National Imaginary

Connell suggests that the figure of the "hero" has been central to the American cultural imagery of the masculine (1995: 213), working to define what it means to be a man in the United States. The novels, movies, and historical texts written about the events of the Revolutionary Wars and frontier-era depict white men (representing civilisation) conquering savage nature and indigenous Americans to found a nation. This set up an archetypical component of an American foundational myth - the opposition between primeval chaos (evil) and the moral order of society (good) (Slotkin 1973: 5). Wars with Native Americans came to stand for that chaos as the European-American warrior inhabited and took on some qualities of their perceived savagery to pave the way for national expansion and ultimately civilisation (Gibson 1993: 18).

This constructed manifest destiny turned a genocide into a heroic victory, deftly avoiding the need to accept any national guilt, and tied the birth of a country to the use of mass violence. Slotkin calls this "regeneration through violence", the foundational American myth.

Among the more intangible factors that popularised this myth, there are two figures who helped to cement the frontier in popular discourse about the national character (Limerick and White 1994). Firstly, the historian Frederick Jackson Turner, whose essay *The Significance of The Frontier in American History* (1921 [1893]) was widely read. Secondly, the scout Buffalo Bill, who fought with General Custer in campaigns against Native Americans and toured a dramatic stage show with actors playing "cowboys and Indians". These very different figures both posited the triumph of civilisation over the untamed wilderness, with the "rifle and the bullet" (1994: 9) key to victory. Turner and Buffalo Bill drew on existing images and icons of the West. Stagecoaches, log cabins, guns, cowboys and "Indians" were drawn together to tell a salient story about America to urbanites already aware of these images. They explained westward expansion as a march of progress and nation building, which came to be associated with hardiness and simplicity (coded as essentially male qualities). The potential that the heroic 19th Century American pioneer might fall victim to savage nature was impetus to develop the qualities of hardiness, individualism and ultimately the ability to use a gun for protection (Limerick and White 1994: 47).

These qualities were the hallmarks of masculinity during the frontier period and some have argued that they remain so today (Kohn 2004; Cox 2007). Amy Cox (2007) traces how guns shifted in meaning throughout American history, starting as multi-purpose tools for administering land before becoming national symbols of masculinity that link to images of the frontier. It was during the period of US expansion into the West and in conflicts with remaining European powers that the myths of America were born (Slotkin 1973). These stories became powerful because they had both a historical depth and a contemporary life in widely consumed fictional representations. They were reproduced in semi-fictional figures like Buffalo Bill and in more modern interpretations like spaghetti westerns and gun play films.

Cox (2007) traces the origin point of an individualistic and symbolically masculine concept of the gun to the War of 1812 with British forces at the Canadian border. The US government ran a propaganda campaign at this time that popularised the idea that it was a man's duty to bear arms for participation in local militias and to defend the republic, explicitly conflating defence

of nation with defence of family (Cox 2007: 148). The warriors of this period became powerful symbols of masculinity in war propaganda and fiction; they helped to create and then preserve a particular social order.

Slotkin argues that myths often deal with the foundation of a people's collective consciousness (1973: 10). In novels and movies of the frontier, the action is set into motion by violent rupture of the social order. An enemy of world ending power attacks a community with little or no explanation other than pure malice and evil. Reluctantly a hero must rise to repel the invaders, but to do so, they must allow themselves to briefly become the perpetrators of violence and master the power of life and death. In other words, they must borrow the power of the Gods, becoming sovereign arbiters of the means of violence. The hero's strength is projected by using violence for good, allowing them to return society to its previous moral order. In hero journeys from around the world this power can mean increased bodily capacities born directly of the Gods, as with Hercules and Perseus in Greek mythology. Or, it may come in the form of a magical talisman, Arjuna's divine bow in the Mahabharata or King Arthur's magic sword Excalibur. In American mythology, the power of the Gods is wielded through the gun (Springwood 2014: 458). The method by which the hero violently suppresses an enemy is the firearm. Through its use, the hero learns to tame the power of the Gods and in the process learns what it means to be an ethical person, or "good guy".

Gun owners often talk about the dangers of learning to use a firearm. Jack, a gun owner in his mid-forties who I lived with for nine-months told me about his first time holding a gun in a reverent tone:

> Joe - So do you think it's important to understanding what a gun can do, that it is a powerful thing?
>
> Jack - It's integral
>
> Joe - And everyone has the capacity to appreciate that?
>
> Jack - Not only the capacity but the obligation, and I'm not even sure if it's a choice so much as something that occurs naturally, which I didn't expect. There's a curious thing that happens actually when you purchase a gun or have a gun in your hand for the first time, particularly at the range . . . there's a profound transition that takes place. I see something change in them. What I experienced was, "wow I literally hold in my hand the

> power of life and death", and there's a profound responsibility that I was suddenly imbued with that I didn't really expect. It just sort-of came over me.

This account sounds like a quasi-mystical experience in which Jack came to understand the sincerity of his task. To grasp the power of life and death is to become God, and with it comes a great responsibility to use that power for good. It is only through superior moral strength of character that a hero can behave ethically to protect rather than destroy. The method by which a good guy gains the ability to wield the means of violence without moral corruption is an important one.

Gun owners in San Diego often emphasised the distinct role of the family as the transmitter of the skills and ethical orientation of gun ownership. Jack grew up in a Pennsylvanian Irish-American family and remembers guns as a normal aspect of his childhood:

> I had hunted a bit when I was a kid. My father had bought me a BB gun . . . he was a marine and had grown up around guns, he taught me gun safety from a very early age.

Fathers often appear in these narratives of learning to shoot as transmitters of responsible gun use. San Diego County Gun Owners member Doug told me that guns were also a normal part of his childhood, but that they should be treated with the correct degree of caution, saying "guns are dangerous, they should never be around if people aren't knowledgeable about how to use them and respectful of them". Doug grew up on a farm in New Hampshire and has fond memories of using the rifle his dad gave him to shoot at woodchucks that would steal from their firewood pile.

Men often referenced warm childhood memories of shooting with family members when thinking about their introduction to guns. They described memories of male inter-generational bonding that was fun but also built ethical character. Doug, Jack, and Michael Schwartz (see chapter one) all claimed that learning to shoot with grandfathers or fathers was an important (or even necessary) component of growing up. They seem to think that this extends to most gun owners who they assume were taught the skills and ethical mind-set that accompanies gun use by capable, present fathers. The memories of learning to shoot with a father in rural landscapes that evoke important myths of the nation acts as one way of embodying and

participating in the transmission of myth across generations as they adapt to new national and familial contexts.

Doug talked often and proudly of his own son who took a keen interest in shooting. He and his wife moved to a rural area in San Diego County partly so that they could bring him up in an environment in which guns were a normal part of life.

> Well we moved here in 1988 and I mean you could shoot out here whenever you wanted. There'd be hunters shooting at quail during that season of the year. When our son was little he was probably 10 or so, he got a BB gun . . . I think it's just normal.

Doug paused at this point in the interview and turned to his wife Betsy who was preparing dinner in the open plan kitchen to ask what she thought about him bringing his son up as a shooter. She said:

> I just didn't know what to expect it would be like for our son . . . I didn't let him play with guns as a kid, as a little boy, because I didn't like that, the idea of promoting that. So guns were different for me, [but] Doug taught him right away, how to use it, how to use it safely and in an environment where safety was of the most importance.

Betsy's role in this particular exchange is familiar. Mothers are often passive, sometimes disapproving, but ultimately supportive figures. However, women can also occupy one other role within narratives of intergenerational bonding and gun use – that of the innocent who needs the protection of a gun wielding man. Doug owned several guns to protect himself, but also to protect his wife. Jack said the same of the women in his life:

> It wasn't unusual for me to give one to my girlfriend, whoever I was dating at the time just to give her a little pocket gun, "just put this in your purse whenever we go out just in case. Or for when I'm not with you and you're coming home from work and it's late and you're in a parking garage or whatever." And I would take them out to the range, to the desert and teach her how to use it, get her comfort level up to where she feels comfortable with it.

Women appear in these narratives as vulnerable members of a hero's community that need protection, either directly from a man wielding a gun, or if that isn't possible, by teaching them how to use firearms. As I discussed in chapter one, this vulnerability politics (Carlson 2014b) projects men's own sense of existential insecurity onto women and utilises firearms as the means of gaining embodied safety. But where has this fear come from? What shared American experiences have contributed to a belief that one needs protection from a firearm?

New War, New Warriors

Jack once told me that the reason the Japanese did not try to invade during World War Two was because they knew the sheer numbers of private citizens who might take up arms against them, suggesting that national victories are tied to gun ownership. Similarly, Joan attributed America's victory in the Cold War to Stalin's anxieties about the opposition his troops might face from gun owners if they invaded from Cuba. Mythologies of gun use that relate to national history are powerful organising narratives that help my informants construct a sense of belonging around gun ownership and use. Physiological and psychological states that come unbidden to the gun wielder (like the moral understanding of a gun's power discussed above) give physical evidence of the power of these myths. Trips to the shooting range, the desert, or carrying a gun in public inform the user of the dangerous character of society, motivating them to engage in political activism through groups like San Diego County Gun Owners to defend a historically and nationally important practice. However, a challenge to the myth of the warrior emerged in the civil rights era and was compounded by US military loss in Vietnam. This created a new formulation of the American warrior that shed the image of the morally motivated good guy in favour of total violence and war.

A particularly powerful method of transmitting and re-making myths emerged in America at the start of the 1900s. From early on, Hollywood was engaging in the work of telling quintessentially American folk tales in a new media that granted its audience a direct audio-visual immersion in a national past. The US government developed direct ties with Hollywood during World War Two as the department of defence provided money for the production of propaganda films that emphasized the proud warrior tradition in American culture in order to recruit young men to fight (Gibson 1994: 20). This relationship continued after the war and from 1948 to 1968 over 200 Hollywood war movies received assistance from the Department of Defence (Gibson 1994). Heroic figures of World War Two, the Indian Wars, and the

Revolutionary Wars could be seen fighting their way across screens throughout the country and internationally. Many social scientists have pointed to the role that exemplary masculine figures embodied in fictional action heroes have played in defining an ideal American masculinity (Mellen 1977; Jeffords 1989; Connell 1995; Arjet 2007). Representations of gender are integral to how male subject positions are inhabited and experienced. Hollywood movies, war novels, comic books, and news media have become the most widely consumed of these representations.

I noticed that many of my interlocutors referenced violent movies that told the story of patriotic American men fighting off historical or contemporary enemies to save their community or nation. Men would tell me to go and watch a film or a piece of footage from news media in order to understand why they needed guns to defend against bad guys. I decided to explicitly inquire about the influence that these films had on their image of masculinity. One San Diego County Gun Owners board member, Tom Pallozzo, told me that:

> The classic Westerns are a great place to start if you're trying to understand guns in America. The Westerns show the classic good versus evil theme which is central to the American culture and the gun part of it.

I asked why he liked these stories so much and he responded that it was because they told the story of how America was born through gun use and violence:

> Something that you need to keep in mind is that up to about the early 1900s most people in America lived in rural areas that made them relatively isolated from their neighbours or help of any kind. Guns were very necessary for safety and protection, as well as for providing food.

Tom said that some of his favourite movies include *High Noon* starring Gary Cooper**,** and the John Wayne films *Rio Bravo*, *The Sons of Katie Elder* and *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance.* All of these movies show a powerful gun wielding man protecting his family or community from unequivocally evil men. The good guy ends the threat to society with violence that reinstates or regenerates the social order (Slotkin 1973).

In these mid-century westerns male heroes were violent, but (for the time) had healthy relationships with their families and clearly defined ethical codes. Bad guys who were shot by the protagonists fell down and disappeared, bullet wounds were almost invisible, but ultimately, the violence in these early films was not as important as the moral story (Gibson 1994: 30). Prior to the 1970s, western movies dominated the box office and one film director from this era described the western movie as "a fairy tale of a hero who is supposedly good saving the town or saving the poor or fighting for something which is moralistically important to the family, [or] to the human beings fighting for the good. [He is] fighting all the demons in the world" (Golan quoted in Gibson 1994: 28). The westerns and war movies of the 1950s had happy endings. However, there has been a shift in the ways that this violence is represented in more modern gun play films.

Following US military failure in Vietnam, masculinity entered a period of crisis (Connell 1995; White 2017). It was the first major military defeat in the nation's history and represented a significant challenge to the mythology of the frontier warrior. Jeffords (1989) suggests that defeat in Vietnam combined with the rise of women's and civil rights movements in the 1960s and 1970s to challenge the stability of hegemonic masculinity defined in historical terms through the ability to enact violence to protect the community or nation. This required a collective process of reformulation, or "re-masculinization", some of which occurred in fictional reinterpretation and representation of the Vietnam War. Joan Mellen (1977) argues that in the 1970s, the emotional range of male characters in American films and novels narrowed considerably to the point that masculinity was routinely depicted as successful only through violent domination of other men. Gibson calls this more violent style of movie the "New War" (1994: 10).

The films that rose to box office prominence during this period were apocalyptic stories of total violence. They depicted over-the-top acrobatic gun use, as in the *Rambo* and *Lethal Weapon* franchises. In novels like Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers* and Philip Caputo's *A Rumour of War,* and films like *Missing in Action* and *Platoon,* fictionalised heroic American soldiers triumph against great odds, turning their own bodies into weapons in order to fight the enemy. Their goal was not necessarily to win the war, but to fight their way out of a bad situation that an incompetent, overly bureaucratic government had landed them in (Jeffords 1989: 1 – 2). *New War* heroes work in professions charged with maintaining an established social order. They are police officers, soldiers, and elite spies who have to bypass corrupt legal system controlled by

weaker men to enact the scale of violence and intimidation necessary to take down the real enemies who want to infiltrate the United States. Diplomatic solutions to international conflicts are seen as hindrances to the moral compass of the vigilante hero who knows that threat of violence must be met with violence; this is held up as the mature approach.

This effectively reframed the defeat of the American military as one caused by the evils of Washington politics, rather than as a failure on the part of individual soldiers. Men were suddenly victims of government mismanagement, echoing historical themes in Revolutionary War and frontier-era mythologies that valorise the actions of the individual to enact change through violence. In *Rambo* and *Missing in Action* it is murky government institutions, not the Vietnamese, who serve as the primary antagonist of the films (Jeffords, 1989: 5). Arjet points to these post-Vietnam War portrayals of men in the creation of the idea of the "white male as both victim and hero" (2007: 128), thus deserving of equal sympathy and attention as those marching in the civil rights movements of the 60s and 70s.

Interestingly, male relationships in these films are depicted as intimate, but that intimacy can only be reached through a shared experience of violence. Rather than portraying the difficult emotional work involved in creating close relationships, they are instead produced in shared victory in a gun fight. This grants a powerful emotional and social role to guns and their associated practices in relationships between men, giving them the means to struggle against seemingly more powerful adversaries – usually faceless and corrupt bureaucratic powers. Robert Arjet suggests that guns are the ideal weapon of the heterosexual male because of the depersonalised effects of killing with a firearm. Cinematically it prevents any scenes of intimacy between men by allowing the hero to kill from a distance (2007: 134). Knives would be too intimate, requiring the forcible penetration of one man by another in close contact. Many of the first novelists of the Vietnam War started their careers as soft porn writers, which seems appropriate given the graphic descriptions of intimate violence in many of their climactic action sequences (Gibson 1994).

Technology and weaponry is closely associated with the male body in New War stories. Sylvester Stallone once referred to his character Rambo as a "fighting machine" (Arjet 2007**)** and throughout the franchise his body is the intense focus of attention, especially in moments where it is in the act of violently suppressing other men. The camera zooms in on his biceps, chest, Adam's apple, and gun (Jeffords 1989: 12), as if his body is not a vehicle for the firearm he wields, but part of the same "fighting machine". The story is careful not to eroticize this

imagery, but renders it safe for a heterosexual male gaze by depicting Rambo as the honed object of military training in the practice of fighting enemies. The male body is established as an object of violence and wielding a gun becomes part of its necessary function. As Jeffords suggests, to link technology and weaponry to bodies in action in this way is to disown the body's own vulnerability and permeability to enemy fire (1989: 15). The gun serves a psychological function that can transform the average American man into an invincible soldier. This converts perceptions of vulnerability into invulnerability.

In these stories, guns are objects of fantasy, more like magic wands that make bad guys go away than real objects with legal, social, or emotional consequences. They act as lightning rods for the power of the Gods that can be wielded to defeat an enemy. In the older Western movies, weapons were not in themselves important, appearing secondary to a man's moral worth, but in the New War, guns are the focus of a hero's power. The firearms carried by these men are oversized and chosen to inflict the most amount of damage possible on an enemy. Rambo carries a massive M60 machine gun in one arm while leaping gracefully through the Vietnam jungle. It was common for arms manufacturers to lobby film makers to include their weapons in their movies because of the bump in sales that they often saw following on-screen displays of their power (Gibson 1994: 100). Clint Eastwood's famous gun in *Dirty Harry* is one example. Jack Flynn used to own a replica of this gun, a massive .44 Magnum Smith and Wesson that he once allowed me to shoot at the range. It was impractically large and I could barely control the kickback with both hands on the grip, but Eastwood's character wields it easily in one hand to kill enemies. Tom told me that he likes Eastwood's westerns like *The Outlaw Josey Wales* and *Unforgiven* because they portray a "grittier, more realistic version of life on the frontier that doesn't shy away from depicting real violence". Buying weapons wielded by favourite heroes transforms the ordinary American man into a warrior, becoming proof that he can resist threats to his home and community.

Jeffords (1989: xi) suggests that warfare is both a field of battle, but also of gender. In these New War movies, male enemies are depicted as feminine, while wives, girlfriends, mothers, and daughters often act as justifications for violent behaviour. Women in these films are one dimensional objects of desire who take up a small amount of screen time as they act as a catalyst for a conflict between men by being kidnapped or murdered. The warrior's task is to keep society safe from real and symbolic enemies. Only when evil is contained and kept outside of society is it safe for female biological reproduction and childrearing. Jack and Doug both

claimed that guns are necessary for defending their wives and children. However, in the gun owning community in San Diego, women are some of the most revered shooters in the group. Joan says she wins the respect of groups of men by showing them that she can draw her gun and hit a target in less than 2 seconds. Michael Schwartz's part time employee at SDCGO is an NRA firearms instructor and fiercely protective mother. Women are not necessarily seen as vulnerable as long as they are expert shooters.

While I was in San Diego Joan was excited about a new incarnation of the gun play film, *John Wick.* In the story, the protagonist's girlfriend is killed early in the film, kicking off an hour and a half killing spree of retribution that effectively side-lines any real experience of loss and grief. Joan told me that the realism of the gun handling in this movie is part of its appeal, however the hero regularly performs acrobatic feats that see him shooting ten or more enemies at a time. The firearm behaves more like the magical weapon of a superhero than the difficult to handle object that I experienced while learning to shoot. The major difference between these New War stories and older westerns is that violence does not move the plot forward or leave the world a better place (Gibson 1994: 114). Killing is an end in itself and the story finishes in the scattered remains of an enemy blown to pieces by the hero's superior fire power. The hero does not mature or grow through this violence, he does not come to sympathise with his enemy, and there is no resolution of the inevitable trauma suffered by the hero throughout the story. Yet, these emotionally absent characters are held up as the height of masculine potency.

While it is difficult to identify exactly how these films play into the imaginations of my informants, I got the sense that they loved the stories for the fun of entering a universe constructed around a simple conflict between good and evil - a battle that seems so much clearer in fiction. The news media also plays on these tropes. For example, after a mass shooting in a church in Texas in November of 2017, the media referred to a civilian shooter who killed the assailant as a "hero". Conservative media outlets like Fox News found comfort in his presence, and even CNN and MSNBC showed interviews with the shooter on repeat. He played the role of the good guy by shrugging off praise from reporters in a mild-mannered, dismissive way that suggested he was just doing his job (Andone et al 2017). Few men are able to live up to the fictional portrayal or idealistic blue print of the good guy, but many cast themselves in that role in their narratives about their own lives.

Shooting courses that train people to shoot and kill aggressors who might attack them on the street bring a broken social order derived from fiction to the everyday life of gun owners. The hyper-vigilance and fear that they express about the risk of a home invasion or physical assault suggests that the scenes of extreme violence and threat they see in movies has somewhat influenced their perception of their world. They are further encouraged to feel this way by conservative media and politicians like Donald Trump, who sketch a portrait of America overrun by dangerous criminals and immigrants. The influence of these stories of masculinity and nationalism does not stop at gun owners, but extend across America and the world as High (2010) has documented in the Ecuadorian Amazon. A distinctly American view of masculinity blends with indigenous concepts even in contexts where gender is conceptualised in very different ways.

Race, Liberals, and Historical Enemies

> "The enemy is the most important figure in all war mythologies, without him neither the society, nor its heroic defenders would exist . . . When societies undergo serious crises, the particular identity of the enemy . . . may change" –Gibson, 1994: 65

In the enemy, the hero sees a mirror image of himself – a good guy who has succumbed to evil instincts. Only the hero's superior powers of self-control and meticulous combat training allow him to triumph. In order to save society, but also himself, the warrior must shatter the mirror in which he sees his enemy by shooting him. But a New War demands new enemies. In the mythologies of the frontier and in the Western movies of the early to mid-20th century, the conquest of nature and Native Americans was seen as a method of advancing civilisation and acted as justification for the genocide that accompanied the founding of the United States. As this frontier wilderness was submerged by towns, cities, roads, and infrastructure, a new lawless savagery emerged that reinvigorated American warrior mythology.

In the gun play films of the New War, run-down urban neighbourhoods became the wilderness of the frontier and the poor communities that occupy them the new "Indians". Enemies take the form of members of inner-city gangs in large American cities like New York and Chicago, portrayed as lawless wastelands of poverty and violence as in Clint Eastwood's *Dirty Harry*. The jungles of Vietnam and Cambodia stand in as new symbolic international threats to American values, as in *Platoon, Missing in Action*, *Apocalypse Now,* and the *Rambo* series.

Although most enemies in these stories are not white, great effort is made to avoid the topic of race (Gibson 1994: 71 – 73). Labels like thug, terrorist, communist, and drug dealer stand in for non-white or foreign enemies (Stroud 2012: 231). They are bad guys because they oppose an American way of life, not necessarily because they happen to be from a different ethnic background to the hero.

In contrast, male friendships in these movies reach across barriers of race, class, age, and religion, but they are always made in the shared experience of violence. This is most obvious in *Lethal Weapon*, in which a white police officer whose wife dies early in the film partners with a black detective. Sceptical of each other from the start they develop a begrudging and then intimate relationship as they shoot their way to the centre of a criminal conspiracy. The story of men bonding through shared violence echoes through history from the work of Fredrick Jackson Turner who claimed that different European ethnicities came together in communities that fought their way to dominance on the American continent throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. In the process, they forged a shared identity based on the experience of the new world (Limerick and White, 1994). These first American immigrants birthed a nation from the ashes of that violence that included diverse European heritages. Of course, full citizenship, basic rights, and a place in this founding mythology was not granted to the non-white population of this new nation (Mennell 2007).

Michael Schwartz told me that San Diego County Gun Owners welcomes all people as long as they believe in the principles set out in the 2nd amendment - the right of a private citizen to bear arms in self-defence. However, in my observations of the organisation I found that people sometimes expressed fears about domestic and foreign threats along ethnic lines. Mexicans were often the subjects of bias in discussions of illegal crossings into the United States at San Diego's southern border. Tom was one of several men who said they didn't care too much about guns or even own them until they saw the footage of riots in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. This protest started in an African-American neighbourhood when a white police officer shot and killed an unarmed black man called Michael Brown, quickly escalating into a period of civil unrest that saw militarised police forces clashing with the local community. Tom expressed concern that this might happen in San Diego, which was why he had decided to, in his words, "get serious about self-defence and get myself a gun".

In the context of white supremacy, black masculinity acts as a symbolic marker against which white gender identity can be constructed (Connell 2005: 80). There were times when explicit

racial fears emerged almost by accident. In an interview I conducted with Jack Flynn, he talked about why guns are necessary for self-defence – especially for vulnerable people:

> You know, my grandmother isn't going to be able to defend herself against a twenty something, young black male, [he pauses and looks at me directly] or white, you know, aggressor, not to bring race into it at all. But you know, a scenario that would likely happen.

His need to qualify and explain his identification of the race of a hypothetical aggressor may have been in response to a reaction from me, but he then doubled down on the statement, suggesting that this was "a scenario that would likely happen". The qualities that Jack identifies in the ideal gun owner raise both racial and class differences between those who can be trusted with guns, and those who can't:

> Here's what's interesting, guns are so pervasive in our society, they are in every socio-economic class, every race, some more so than others, but if you look at who are the true enthusiasts and "gun nuts" if you will, they are by in large white, middle and upper class individuals . . . I think there's a big misconception. The serious gun owners . . . have a college education, above average income and put 10,000 rounds down range every year.

In the eyes of other informants, particular ethnic groups have ruined the image of gun ownership in California, as in this statement by Michael Schwartz:

> It's been a good generation and a half that guns have been vilified in California. Since the late 80s. Also the bigger issue was the gangs in LA. Like if you go back and watch *Straight Outta Compton*, I watched that movie about NWA and I realised that they were just living this gang lifestyle that was just abusing firearms ownership and people said, alright we've had enough, we're going to start banning these things. You know, it really started there. People in music videos, in rap videos posing with guns, it was just a real problem with gangs around the LA area.

Michael blames aspects of African-American culture for what he claims is an anti-gun ownership legislature in California. Given that gun rights rhetoric seems to derive almost directly from the heritage of the Black Panther Party, what Michael does here is allow black masculinity to stand in as how one shouldn't use guns. Places like Compton and labels like gangster are euphemisms for racial difference that construct hegemonic masculinity (Stroud

2012: 231). It seems that there is a way to legitimately and ethically wield guns, but it looks decidedly middle class and white. This is similar to the almost universal hatred of President Barack Obama, who stands as the object of derision among my gun owning informants. Tom occasionally referred to Obama as "anti-American" and claims that he managed to dismantle many great American institutions, although he was never explicit about which ones. He also blamed the former president for what he called "a climate of racial division" and says that this was why the riots in Ferguson had occurred.

The fact that shooters bond around the shared experiences of gun ownership is easy to see. I heard communities of sports teams, defensive shooters, gun rights activists, and friends talk about how at home they feel at the range. The intense emotional investment that is required in preparing oneself to shoot an opponent or physically embody a historical mythology allows participants to quickly form long lasting friendships. In the shared task of mastering life and death they make themselves essential to their loved ones, displaying a patriotic willingness to defend America from threats, and gain a close group of confidants who share those experiences. Joan said of her love for her fellow shooters: "When members of the gun community have your back they really have your back . . . It's just this camaraderie based on a shared experience. And it really doesn't matter where you come from. We have doctors, lawyers, Orthodox Jews, Buddhists".

I also experienced this quick bonding as I became close with my interlocutors in environments in which we shared in learning the skills and mind-set behind defensive shooting. This is further supported by the fact that San Diego County Gun Owners accept and actively get to know the LGBT community who are enthusiastic about firearms. In this environment, the process of learning to shoot seems to produce a unity of experience that is understood to transcend race, religion, and gender. This may be true in intention, but the overwhelming majority of shooters in the groups that I studied are white and male (with the exception of the Pink Pistols LGBTQ+ activist community). Fears of ethnic others and immigrants motivate gun owners to buy weapons and train with them, but most live in safe affluent neighbourhoods or rural areas, so are at very little risk of attack - there is no pressing need to put their gun wielding skills to the test.

When Heroes Fail

In this chapter I have focused on the way in which male gun owners strive to inhabit a "good guy" subject position. Here I take a closer look at one informant mentioned above, Jack Flynn. His story demonstrates that men can sometimes fail to live up to these historical and fictional archetypes, even coming to see themselves as the "bad guy". His own inability to inhabit this subject position holds up a mirror image to the qualities he values in a man. Jack and I lived together for nine months between 2013 and 2014 when I moved into a house near the University of California San Diego while on an exchange programme. Jack, it turned out, owned ten firearms, ranging from handguns, to hunting rifles, and he kept a gun loaded under his bed at all times. Jack moved to California from Pennsylvania when he was 18 to attend university and has been in San Diego ever since. When I met him, he was in his mid-40s and kept his hair long, dressing casually in shorts, t-shirt, and baseball cap, giving the impression that he could be another Californian stereotype. In many respects he is. He surfs, he rides a motor-bike, and enjoys smoking marijuana. Despite this, he regularly voices his disapproval of his state's gun control laws, calling it, "the communist republic of California".

Jack framed gun ownership in terms of self-defence (as discussed above), but also in terms of a personal connection to his nation:

> The fight for gun ownership is deeply patriotic . . . we really are a culture that's very anti-authoritarian . . . sort of like, I don't need to be told what to do, I already know what morals, and virtues and ethics are, if I get it wrong I'll figure it out and I'll get it right. So, I think that that is part of what keeps gun culture in place, is this sort of fierce individualism

Jack evokes the myths of American exceptionalism and individualism through the lens of gun ownership, proposing that it is part of an ethical orientation of self-government. When I spent time with and interviewed him in 2013/14, he was the epitome of the "good guy" referenced by all of my informants. He owned both modern and historically salient weapons, taught his partners how to shoot for protection, and had a stable job in a critical thinking business. When I returned to San Diego for fieldwork in 2016, I reconnected with Jack, hoping that he might act as a major gatekeeper in gaining access to groups of gun owners. However, I found him in a completely new set of life circumstances that made this impossible.

Following a turbulent separation from a long term girlfriend he tried to start a legal marijuana farm in the desert east of Los Angeles. This venture ended in a physical confrontation with his partners that left him injured and jobless. Suddenly out of money and having alienated many of his friends with his erratic behaviour, he packed all of his possessions into his dilapidated car and pitched a tent in a canyon between two affluent neighbourhoods in San Diego.

Jack claimed that he had chosen to live homeless, but lamented that the actual experience was quite different than he had hoped. He hadn't expected the stigma that suddenly accompanied him wherever he went. Friends shunned him, people skirted around him in the street, and parents stopped their children from talking to him. A resident of a nearby house took to calling the police regularly, forcing Jack to dismantle his lean-to shelter and move on. He more than once pointed out that this neighbour had a "Vote Clinton" bumper sticker on their car, as if this proved him right about something. Reflecting on this dramatic shift in the time since I had last seen him Jack said:

> It's been funny for me actually, becoming homeless, because, you know, having lost everything and camping and making do, it's been really [pause]. I mean, there's plenty of times I cried about just what a train wreck my life had become, but what went away with that was also the fear of losing everything. And that fear was more, much more constricting than I even realised . . . It's incredibly freeing. I mean it was actually one of the most profound freedoms I've ever felt. I mean I even lost my health. I got the crap beat out of me, I broke four bones in my face and had nothing . . . we live in this delusion that there are so many resources out there for homeless people. So, it's been difficult, but, you know what, I'm still breathing.

Jack found pride in this lifestyle, telling me that he was experiencing America like the first pioneering explorers who pushed west across the North American continent, forging a nation as they went. This sense of kinship with heroic figures from America's past helped Jack to deal with what he called "the intense shame" he felt while living homeless. I learned in our long conversations that his entire collection of guns had been stolen or lost in the previous year. He admitted to a sense of anxiety about not having guns on or near him, especially since his chances of experiencing violence had increased dramatically with homelessness. But, he said, "I think it would be more important if I had a family to be honest. I would insist on having [a

gun]". His separation from these prized objects has not dented his performance of exemplary masculinity, shown in his fantasies about protecting innocents from harm.

As my fieldwork in San Diego progressed, I found out more about Jack's situation. It emerged later that he was a long term user of methamphetamine. He said that for twenty years it had offered an occasional escape from memories of childhood trauma. However, his use had always remained under control and had not impacted on his jobs, or friendships. He started using it more because he was in a relationship with a drug dealer who kept him supplied even after they had separated. This resulted in an inability to consistently work and he lost his room in the house we had shared in 2013/2014. I found this out towards the end of my fieldwork after he suffered a period of what he called "meth psychosis". This delusional state caused him to believe he was being hunted by an elite group of Navy Seals (a branch of Naval special forces which are stationed in San Diego). After struggling to find help from local hospitals who turned him down due to a lack of insurance, Jack's father flew out from Pennsylvania and managed to get him into a residential rehabilitation programme. I spent time at this institution with Jack and it is where he was living when I returned to the UK in July of 2017.

In *Falling from Grace* (1988), Kathleen Newman shows that downwards mobility can trigger a kind of social death. People who lose their source of income drift out of social circles as they can longer afford to accompany their friends to expensive restaurants, paid cultural events, or bigger trips. While this is not necessarily malicious, it is an inevitable consequence of class based segregation that determines access to mainstream social life by income, as well as other demographic markers like race-ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and age. People might also internalise downwards mobility as a sense of failure as they search their recent history for evidence of what they did wrong, sometimes coming to believe that their ill fortune is a result of an identified character flaw (Newman 1988).

Jack insisted that his addiction and homelessness were entirely his fault. Even as the foundations of an archetypical, exemplary masculinity crumbled beneath him, he did what a good man is supposed to do, relied on himself to solve his problems and took the full force of the blame for his failures. Even in times of desperation he fiercely clung to the ethical code of the personally responsible "good guy" whose capacity for violence was supposed to steer him towards self-sufficiency and moral good. In his eyes he had become a "bad guy", attributing his addiction to weakness and a lack of self-control. His sense of shame at being unable to meet

exemplary criteria speaks to the durability of the "good guy" subject position that emerges from a negotiation between bodily experiences, gendered expectations, and national discourses about the historical deeds of good guys. When I accompanied Jack to the range in 2013/2014, I could tell that he loved shooting and relished introducing his passion to another interested person. Surfing and riding his motorcycle acted as similarly thrilling embodied experiences that Jack pursued regularly. When he was no longer able to participate in these activities after losing his possessions and his home, he turned to a more directly harmful practice that only compounded his isolation.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored how gun owners, and particularly men, engage with historical stories from America's past that tie their strong support of contemporary gun rights to a mythology of "regeneration through violence" (Slotkin 1973). These myths provide nationally salient models that construct a coherent sense of masculinity for my informants. Firearms are objects charged with meaning over time (Stewart 1996) that provide an embodied immersion in a spatio-temporal mythical landscape – particularly in activities like Cowboy Action Shooting. A crisis in this warrior mythology followed from the Vietnam War and other threats to hegemonic white masculinity, like the feminist and civil rights movements of the 1960s and 70s. This led to a reinterpretation of the story of the lone gunman who puts the world right in violent action movies. Giving the American warrior new enemies to struggle against –inner-city gangs, drug dealing Hispanic immigrants, communists, and, more recently, Islamic terrorists. These fears are reflected in the racial anxieties expressed by many of the gun owners I encountered. Finally, in presenting the story of a "good guy" who came to see himself as a "bad guy", I aimed to show how exemplary masculine archetypes sometimes fail in dramatic ways that negatively impact men who strive for complete self-sufficiency.

These fictionalised "bad guys" featured heavily in the rhetoric of Donald Trump's presidential campaign in demands for a southern border wall between Mexico and the United States, in unsuccessful attempts to place a ban on immigration from Muslim majority countries, and in recent calls by the president to instate the death penalty for drug dealers. The threats to American security and lifestyle that Trump encourages his supporters to fear echo the historical themes of the breakdown of a social order maintained by strong, individualistic men who can wield the means of violence for good because of their superior ethical character. The gun is a

dangerous tool that must be mastered and tamed to keep threats outside of society so that it is safe for both women and the continuation of America's founding principles. This gives a liminal position to the American warrior who must take on some of the qualities of evil (i.e. violence) in order to defend his community. He places himself slightly outside of the day to day social order to protect his fellow citizens.

This chapter has sketched out a broad historical analysis that may seem overly deterministic. However, in the next chapter I show how transgender members of San Diego County Gun Owners reinterpret these myths of America's past in contemporary political arguments. The fear of vulnerability that my male interlocutors use to legitimate their desire for firearms resonate with demographics of gun owners who are at an enhanced risk of verbal or physical abuse due to their gendered presentation. I discuss how perceptions of vulnerability are reaffirmed or challenged by gun use.

Chapter. 3

Becoming and Defending your "Authentic Self"

Introduction

In late May, one of my informants, a young transgender woman called Helen, was interviewed on a Comedy Central show hosted by comedian Moshe Kasher. This new addition to the network was one example of the increasingly political tone of late night comedy in the US following the 2016 election (Price, 2017; Adalian, 2017). On this week's episode, discussion centred on gun rights and whether liberals should consider purchasing firearms in light of Donald Trump's presidency. As the head of the Pink Pistols, an LGBT[5] firearms advocacy and training group, Helen was invited on to the show to make the case that private gun ownership should be seen as the first line of defence for communities at an increased risk of attack.

Along with four other members of the Pink Pistols, Helen was interviewed about issues of identity and belonging as a transgender gun owner. A particularly interesting exchange

[5] I use the acronym LGBT throughout this chapter rather than any other formulation because this is the term that my informants used.

followed a question about conflicting identities. The host asked, "was it easier to come out as a gun owner, or a queer person?" One of the panel replied, "I feel more accepted as a gay guy in the gun community than as a gun owner in the gay community". The host then suggested that the panel act out a scenario in which they would "come out" to him as gun owners. With a dead-pan expression, Helen said, "so Moshe, there's something I've been wanting to tell you . . . [pause] . . . I'm a gun owner". The host reacted in exaggerated anger and feigned severe disappointment in Helen who quipped, "I wish that wasn't as accurate as it often is".

Helen admitted to me later that she had been unsure about whether to appear on the show - especially as she sees Comedy Central as an example of a wider liberal bias in the American media. However, she felt that it was important to reach out to a non-traditional audience of potential gun owners, especially young people in the LGBT community. She says that it is hard for a transgender woman to be open about conservative political leanings:

> I have had LGBT individuals who I am pretty close with, who I did pretty incredible things for, you know, was there for them in their deepest darkest times of need, and the second I started a Pink Pistols chapter [they] pretty much disowned me . . . the level of acceptance has been infinitely better in the 2nd amendment community than in the LGBT community.

In this chapter I examine how my fieldwork with transgender gun owners can help to explain national debates surrounding the limits of what are considered legitimate claims to gender identity and presentation. My informants show the messy yet creative way that people negotiate a sense of belonging while living within multiple over-lapping identity categories that are often seen as incommensurable. I found that gun ownership and use is tied to narratives of becoming more vulnerable through transition. As my transgender interlocutors embarked on the process of aligning their physical bodies with, what they called their "true" or "authentic" gender, they spoke of feeling vulnerable to attack due to political, legal, and social discrimination against them, but also because of personal encounters with violence that they have experienced.

The transgender women I knew often framed their perceived vulnerability in terms of a reduction in size and strength as their bodies changed. They shifted from an unconscious, unmarked identity as white, men, to a stigmatized, non-binary gendered body. In the case of Nathan, a transgender man, this increased risk of attack derived from physical disabilities, but

also from what he claimed were the remanants of a feminine body that he described in terms of weakness. I will also look at how women engage with these narratives by sharing stories of threat in which they were made to feel vulnerable.

In chapter one I argued that a concept of vulnerability is used by gun rights activists as a strategic political tool (Carlson 2014b). Here I show how this narrative extends into those communities of gun owners who perceive themselves as being more vulnerable. As members of the Pink Pistols came to understand the prospect of an increased risk of attack due to their gender presentation they reacted by training in defensive firearm techniques. Gun use and carrying a firearm in public gives my interlocutors an embodied sense of safety and mastery over their environment. The ability to skilfully wield a firearm converted a hierarchy in capacities to enact violence to one of equality in which the female form suddenly gained the explosive ballistic capacity to resist aggressors. Firearms become tangible proof of safety in a new gendered identity and body that they see simulataneously as a true experession of themselves, but as more vulnerable to attack. Gun rights activism and the bodily practices that accompany shooting can become linked to gendered identities.

My trans interlocutors also worried about how their shift in appearance might be perceived by those who questioned or overtly denied the authenticity of their claims to gender identity, occasionally speaking about themselves as monstrous outsiders who need to demand their right to be taken seriously by wielding a firearm that secures their sense of safety. However, this task of securing is never complete. Training with a gun is part of a set of processes that aim to situate my interlocutors within a changing body by rejecting labels of vulnerability that might be thrust upon them by society. My ethnographic data shows the value of paying attention to how gender is produced within activist communities in which its definition is an aspect of claims to authenticity. The use of vulnerability as a political tool (Carlson 2014b) is not always strategic, rather it can emerge from an interior sense of embodied insecurity. The rhetoric of vulnerability deployed in arguments for gun ownership is a structuring narrative into which experience can be placed.

My interlocutors construct their understandings of vulnerability by blending gun rights rhetoric with an embodied knowing. I aim to show how important the body can be as an instrument of knowing the world in a community of LGBT gun rights activists whose very existence challenges assumptions about the kind of Americans who wield firearms. Neither gendered

identities nor firearms ownership can be understood fully without narratives of embodied experience that show the way in which social and political motivations arise from perceptions of insecurity and fear.

Thinking with Gender

Although I use the term LGBT throughout this chapter, I will be focusing on transgender shooters. Joan and Helen both told me that there is a large community of transgender women (and some transgender men) in San Diego who are interested in learning how to shoot. I use the term transgender in the same way that my informants described the category – as a term for those who have transitioned, are transitioning, or who occasionally present a gendered identity that differs from what they were assigned at birth. This corresponds with transgender activist definitions of the word, which seek to encompass anyone who defines themselves as gender non-conforming (Papoulias 2006: p231, GLAAD 2018). In using terms like femininity or masculinity, feminism, and gun rights activism, I refer explicitly to the context of the contemporary United States and Southern California where they take on specific meanings.

This raises the question of who can know and represent transgender experiences. I don't claim to have any special insight or justification to do so, but my informants did place explicit trust in me to write about them. Joan, told me that she didn't know what I was going to write about her, but that she at least knew that it would be true, referring to my willingness to engage in long dialogue about her experiences. I can only use my engagements with this shooting community in the hope that it opens up new understandings of how guns can become linked to aspects of the gendered self in ways that are sometimes counter-intuitive. To this end, as in the rest of this thesis, I quote at length from my informant's own testaments, hoping to show the complexities, the challenges, but also the joys that arise from their experiences.

The Pink Pistols

In an article published in *Salon* in March, 2000, columnist Jonathan Rauch lamented a rise in hate crimes against the LGBT community and suggested that laws cannot protect the thousands of queer Americans who face prejudice on a daily basis. Rauch urged that members of the LGBT community should learn to shoot and carry concealed weapons so that they can become comfortable with defending themselves. This article came to the attention of a Libertarian

member of the Massachusetts state senate, who formed a shooting club called the Pink Pistols that grew into an organisation with chapters around the country. In 2007, Bill O'Reilly, former host of news commentary show *The O'Reilly Factor* on *Fox News*, claimed that the group represented a network of gangs who were using their pink pistols to threaten young girls into becoming lesbians (Paton 2013). The ensuing backlash against O'Reilly forced his show's producers to issue an apology, which ultimately significantly raised the group's profile. Soon they were being contacted to comment on legal cases and national debates regarding gun rights.

The Pink Pistols website states its mission clearly in two highlighted axioms: "all people have the right to defend themselves from harm" and that "everyone has an individual right to bear arms as protected by the 2nd Amendment" (Pink Pistols 2015). This message resonated with many conservative members of the San Diego LGBT community who feel that their use of firearms for self-defence is disregarded in what they often referred to as "the liberal media". Helen was one of those people. Following a mass shooting in Orlando, Florida in June, 2016 that killed 50 people at an LGBT nightclub (BBC News 2016), Helen, angry and afraid, decided then that owning a gun for personal protection was the only way to keep herself and her community safe. She formed a local chapter of the Pink Pistols that has since grown into the largest in the nation. The group meets on a semi-regular basis at shooting ranges to share their knowledge about defensive shooting or receive training from experts. They have also held social events at which Helen encourages members of the San Diego County Gun Owners to mix with the LGBT members of her organisation.

Helen was born and raised in San Diego. Like many of the county's residents, she served in the military for a short while before attending college in Los Angeles County. Helen calls her decision to publically transition a process of becoming her "authentic self". However, this has also meant battling prejudice from some of her closest friends, colleagues, and customers. She works for a mobile phone company and says that one of the skills she has developed as a saleswoman is a tolerance for rejection. Some of her colleagues were uncomfortable with her transition and she was even threatened with violence by a customer who did not want to be served by her. Helen grew up with guns as a normal part of family life, but was convinced of their value as defensive tools when her father was attacked and almost killed when she was young:

> I think I was just old enough to be like, you know, a little traumatised by the fact that other human beings, you know, have the ability to end your life if they should choose to do that . . . you never really lose that self-defence mentality. For me, it's all about the practical application as a tool . . . I know that if somebody breaks into my home in the middle of the night that I have a force equaliser I can use, even if there's three dudes, you know. I'm not waiting for the cops. They can come clean up their bodies.

She now owns a 12-guage shotgun and a number of handguns for home defence, suggesting that their presence in her life is even more important in light of her recent transition:

> I came out to the LGBT community about a year and a half ago, and, you know, I'm sure you've seen the statistics, it's just the reality of being a targeted minority now, is kind of shitty. You know, our lives are just as worth defending as anybody else's, it's just we need to be more conscious of defending our lives.

To use the term "transgender" in reference to one's identity is to immediately inhabit a political position that launches the individual into a struggle for social and political legitimacy, but also physical safety (Stryker 2006: 2). According to a survey conducted by the National Center for Transgender Equality (2015: 198), 48% of nearly 30,000 respondents reported that they had been denied equal treatment, verbally harassed, or physically attacked in the last year because they were transgender, while nearly half (47%) had been sexually assaulted at some point in their lives. Helen emphasized that she is not a "victim", but told me, "I've lost a lot of muscle mass . . . I'm definitely a fighter but I'm definitely realistic about my abilities. I was never really any more unsafe than anyone else prior [to transition]." The way in which Helen occupies her body is defined by both her gendered identity and the way in which a firearm guarantees her safety within it.

Partly due to the increasing visibility of trans experiences in media and public debate, popular discourse surrounding gender identity in the US is shifting to reflect a growing awareness of non-binary gender expressions (Brubaker 2016). My trans interlocutors link the female body with weakness or vulnerability, and the male body with protective strength and violence, yet these categeories have shifted throughout their lives. This fluctuating sense of belonging in the body reflects broader ambiguities surrounding how to talk about trans experiences in public debates. Brubaker (2016) identifies three ways that the term "trans" is used in popular political

and media contexts that comment on transgender experiences and rights. First, many see trans as a trajectory between the "natural" categories of male and female. This implies that a transgender person is born in the wrong body and should seek medical correction so that they align with their "natural" gender. This is often the least disruptive to gender norms because it does not call into question the legitimacy of binary conceptions of gender.

Second, trans can be conceptualised as a state of being "in-between", characterised by various forms of androgyny that still refer to a binary structure. The final way of conceptualising trans is as an identity that transcends binary categories altogether (Brubaker 2016: 423). Those who identify as gender fluid or non-conforming are developing new ways of thinking about the relationship between "self" and embodied gender. The way in which the public understands and uses these three different frameworks of trans sets the ideological parameters of the debate about transgender rights. As Brubaker identifies, some conservative commentators make claims that insinuate transgender individuals are simply choosing a new gender on a whim and thus should not receive support from medical insurance companies or federal and state governments.

My interlocutors are well aware of these kinds of critiques. They often talk about their identity in ways that echo bio-medical definitions of gender in order to claim legitimacy. This involves a great deal of personal reflection and strategic presentation of what it is like to inhabit a transgender identity. Strategic use of a biological perspective has a second function - it is often necessary for the purposes of access to medical insurance that covers gender alignment surgeries. Those who seek surgery must justify their claims using medical terminologies (Sadjadi 2019). My interlocutors find further evidence of the naturalisation of gender in their perceived loss of safety that accompanies their reduced body as they transition to a female subjectivity.

This may be why Helen seemed to talk about gender as binary. This way of thinking usually privileges biology over learned behaviours in theorizing the legitimate boundaries of gender expression or performance (Butler 1990). My interlocutors most commonly referenced Brubaker's first way of thinking about transgender identities and framed their transition in terms of natural predispositions over which they had no control. Because of this, Helen and other informants prefer to be called women, with the transgender prefix reserved for their activist work, when being visible is both useful and necessary. This does not mean that they all

understand gender as a natural phenomenon, but does imply that it is seen as somewhat permanent and interior; one can inhabit an authentic body that brings physical and psychological perceptions into alignment.

By suggesting that their gender assignment was simply an accident of nature or that they were born into the wrong type of body, my informants confront sceptical conservative gun owners with claims to identity framed around the need for medical intervention to correct an error in biology. Thus, they evoke enlightenment ideals of objective, scientific knowledge in talking about their gender, but also a set of beliefs surrounding choice and autonomy that includes their decisions to carry a gun to protect their newly vulnerable bodies. Gender binaries are essentialised (Spivak 1988) within political, but also social, contexts where speaking in terms of a transition between "natural" gender does not unsettle the binary assumptions that many Americans who have not encountered transgender communities make.

Our ability to talk about the attributes of biological sex is constrained by associations between power, language, and conventional institutions of gender (Foucault 2008; Butler 1990: 6 – 8). Gender discontinuity can only occur within a structural framework that persistently constructs the gendered world as binary, and to which the vast majority of society adheres. This appears to make those categories biological and timeless through discursive, representational, and habitual mechanisms of a cognitively integrated binary system. Recent scholarship has attempted to explore the tension between social construction and conventional notions of gender by focusing on embodied, subjective accounts of what it is like to be transgender in everyday life (Hines & Sanger 2010: Nordmarken 2014). Gender is a stabilizing category of identity formation that is easy to apply and recognise based on cultural stereotypes (Butler 1990: 17), but what does gender do in contexts in which its performance is highly visible or critical to political and personal identities?

Paying attention to the subjective experiences of transgender people might grant new understandings of how people are challenging normative formulations of the gender binary in everyday contexts. Susan Stryker suggests that transgender lives provide "deconstructive moments when foreground and background seem to flip and reverse, and the spectacle of an unexpected gender phenomena illuminates the production of gender normativity in a startling new way. In doing so, the field begins to tell new stories about things many of us thought we knew" (2006: 13). By including transgender experiences within the study of gender, we may

be able to expand into and go beyond homogenisation of experiences of femininity and masculinity. Telling stories about what it means to embody a diverse range of gendered subjectivities calls into question an entire epistemological system that orders the diversity of bodily experiences and identities into two static categories.

A focus on embodied experience addresses the accusation that a deconstructionist position can exclude and alienate some transgender individuals who say they have found their true gender identity through transition (Papoulias 2006: 232). This is certainly the case for Helen who said that her transition was a process of becoming her "authentic self". Another advantage of a renewed focus on the body is that it reinstates particular kinds of data and forms of knowledge that have been structurally marginalised in the sciences. Transgender communities show the extent to which the body acts as the seat of knowing (1994) by challenging normative social understandings and cultural representations. Stryker (2006: 12) suggests that the marginalisation of bodily experiences and perceptions in the social sciences emerged in tandem with a European enlightenment epistemology that drew data and therefore meaning only from distanced observation and analysis. So, personal bodily evidence came to be seen as subjective, flawed, and un-measureable.

In this enlightenment worldview, anatomical and biological descriptions of sex also defined gender roles and identity. Thus, a biological male could only be a social male. But, transgender experiences call into question this entire epistemological system, detaching the body from its relationship with the more unstable linguistic, institutional, and psychological categories of gender (Stryker 2006). This has the potential to destabilise an old theory of knowledge, which might explain why early psychiatrists, as well as common stereotypes, often insinuate that the transgender community is transgressive. Just by existing, they upset an enduring system of gender theorisation (Papoulias, 2006: 231).

Becoming Authentic

Belonging in a non-binary gendered community with an enthusiasm for firearms places trans gun owners in multiple over-lapping identity categories, leading to both conflict and collaboration. The ways in which trans-shooters struggle to find acceptance within both LGBT and gun owning communities indicates that cultivating a sense of belonging in one's body,

community, or nation can be a contradictory process of connection and alienation. By looking at how these communities are coming together in San Diego, it is possible to see the way in which antagonism plays a productive role in generating a sense of belonging across diverse social groups. In challenging normative performances of gender within a conservative political context, trans gun owners occupy a unique position from which to speak about the benefits of arming in self-defence based on their experiences of prejudice. Just as Michael Schwartz constitutes his political identity in opposition to gun control groups, these disagreements can generate the friction that creates a purpose and a community.

Helen has utilised her uniquely ambiguous social position as a trans gun rights activist to bring traditionally opposed communities together. The confusion that her lack of conformity generates acts as a kind of social and political capital, which combines with her talent for articulating personal experiences of prejudice and threat. This creates an emotional resonance in arguments for gun ownership. Nordmarken (2014) draws a compelling portrait of prejudice in an account of being recognised as a transgender man. He describes in detail the rejection and personal feelings of guilt that arise when someone sees gender non-conformity in his body. Nordmarken builds on Stryker's (1994) comparison between these moments and the experience of alienation felt by Frankenstein's monster as he searches for acceptance in Mary Shelley's horror novel:

> I am being watched . . . glancing up, I confront eyes querying me. Eyes wondering. Boy or girl? . . . I enjoy the chaos my body prompts. These eyes feel and imagine themselves to be legitimate knowers. How dare I, as Other, challenge their abilities to 'know'? . . . Their failure to attribute a gender category to me makes my ambiguous gender performance a form of resistance . . . I was a successful gender terrorist. Monstering successfully. (Nordmarken, 2014: 40)

The metaphor of monstrosity highlights the fear and shame that can accompany non-conformity, but also how those feelings can be converted into resistance. Nordmarken's presence in society disrupts a theory of gender that is deeply embedded in both cultural institutions and popular thinking. He demonstrates how the reclamation of monstrousness from those who would see it in ambiguously gendered bodies shakes the foundations of what are considered normative performances of identity. This creates powerful opportunities for

transgender individuals to challenge conventional expectations about gender in political contexts.

Helen says that her activism has dual motivations. She uses the Pink Pistols to organise training for LGBT individuals in the practical skills of shooting and other defensive techniques, but also invites a variety of gun owners from the wider community to their events, aiming to challenge stereotypes:

> The majority of the LGBT community is very anti-gun and actually kind of anti-self-defence in many ways. And I understand why. The majority of the LGBT community is left wing just because of the way the right has treated the LGBT community, but I believe that their anti-self-defence, anti-firearm mentality is a huge mistake.

This points towards Helen's second method of protecting her community - a subtler attempt to make gun owners more accepting of her peers:

> The average conservative might not have had any exposure to the LGBT community . . . the underlying more powerful good is just in bridging those traditional divides . . . I have successfully won over and been invited into the circles of right wing, conservative militias, as a . . . [she pauses and smiles] . . . as me! Just being in those spaces I am decreasing the amount of people who would ever even consider being hateful in any open manner to an LGBT individual.

Helen has gained some supporters within the San Diego County Gun Owners, but she has also spoken about how she feels that she stands out from the average member. I got the sense that there was some discomfort about the inclusion of transgender shooters in the organisation when talking to a male gun owner in his 20s. In reference to transgender women he shook his head sceptically and said "they are not natural". When I told him that I had come with a member of the Pink Pistols he suddenly seemed less open to answering questions. This suggests that my sample of gun owners within the organisation might be skewed towards the more accepting members, but also shows why trans gun owners feel the need to provide a coherent account of the legitimacy of their identities that resonates with the wider gun rights activist community.

On the other hand, I found that many members of the San Diego County Gun Owners were forming friendships with transgender shooters. For two years running Michael Schwartz has given his "activist of the year" award to transgender women. This accolade was presented in front of hundreds of local gun owners at an annual celebration dinner and it was clear that both women took pride in this recognition of their efforts. Helen sits in the spaces between traditional divides that are drawn around social issues and identities in the United States. The antagonistic response that some gun owners have shown to this new perspective actually allows her to position herself more legitimately as the young, tolerant face of gun rights activism in San Diego. Something that has benefited the San Diego County Gun Owners in their efforts to recruit members. While their acceptance within the organisation could be seen as tokenistic or strategic, the Pink Pistols are gaining visibility within the broader gun rights movement in San Diego and finding meaning in activism.

Helen's narrative of becoming her true self is bound up with her involvement in the gun rights movement. In the early days of her transition she said that she cut herself off from her community as many life-long friends abandoned her. She talks of finding her authentic self as synonymous with forming the Pink Pistols:

> It's honestly been one of the best things in my life over the last year and a half. For the first time in my life I'm doing something that feels good. The family that I've built from it are good, the friends, it's something I believe in, it's doing good in providing acceptance for the LGBT community, it's doing good in training LGBT people in how to defend themselves.

This community of firearms enthusiasts show how gun ownership and use can take a place of equal importance to gender within a person's sense of self. By arguing that guns are necessary to protect all citizens, Helen confronts sceptical gun owners with the idea that the lives of gay and transgender Americans are just as worth defending as theirs. She deploys the notion of an increased "vulnerability" based on her gender presentation, which extends an argument that many traditional male gun owners make in relation to their own desires for arming in self-defence. The practices and ideologies of defensive gun use can play a role in how one experiences and expresses gender identity as both are deployed to narrativise and essentialise an authentic self.

Transitioning to Safety

Members of San Diego County Gun Owners and the Pink Pistols are highly reflective participants in a fight for political legitimacy, and so they have learned to talk in legal terms that make sense within a debate about gun rights. But, they also have deep moral concerns about what it means to be safe in their day to day lives. They grapple with questions such as, what kind of threat do my fellow citizens pose me and my loved ones? How can I protect my family and others around me? What does it mean to belong to and have a role in keeping communities safe?

The answers to these questions usually revolve around increased access to firearms. Despite a deep respect for the rule of law among my interlocutors, there is also a fundamental scepticism of the power of those laws to protect individuals when a violent crime is committed. Carrying a gun in public is said to confer personal safety, but also helps to protect communities from existential threats. The logic goes as follows; although rare, the possibility of experiencing violence in society is not out of the question (and the possibility is increased as a member of the LGBT community). In the event that someone threatens physical violence, the police can do nothing until they arrive on the scene, by which time it will be too late. Therefore, it is seen as self-evident that one should take personal responsibility for dealing with violence. This leads them to train with a tool that can be deployed in the moment to protect themselves or others.

This concern with safety is brought into focus by members of the Pink Pistols who show why a vulnerable community might desire the right to bear arms in public given the higher rates of violence they experience. Helen's suspicion of legal solutions is clear:

> Well a lot of it ties back to a broader problem with our system of government, which is that people always think that every issue can be solved with a law . . . Like, a tragedy happens and then people say, "we should do something, we should do something, we should do something" . . . the way of dealing with that problem is not necessarily to pass another law.

This is consistent with Helen's stated political ideology, Libertarianism which is a broadly interpreted set of ideas that often translates into a mistrust of all government interventions

beyond the military, police force, and infrastructure. Helen claims that government legislation has been used to oppress minority groups. As evidence of this fear she points to the numerous discriminatory laws across the country that exclude transgender people from bathrooms that match their gender presentation or deny them legal recognition of that identity. The gun owners that I knew joined a national chorus of gun rights rhetoric in their dismissal of attempts to curb violence through stricter gun control measures.

One member of the Pink Pistols, a transgender man in his early 50s called Nathan, demonstrated his fear of being vulnerable as an aspect of his changing body. Nathan first handled a gun after he received a single shot .22 calibre rifle for his 20th birthday and says he mostly used it for fun rather than self-defence. He then gained experience of arming in public while working as a security guard throughout his 20s. I met Nathan at a firearms training course in Nevada and he seemed to spend much of his time paying close attention to instructors. While others joked around or chatted, he spent extra time trying to improve his shooting so that he would be ready in the event of a physical threat.

In thinking about how he is accepted within the wider shooting community, Nathan suggests that he sometimes struggles to feel comfortable around male gun owners. He and I quickly bonded over our shared sense of intimidation when confronted with the aggressive masculinity of many of our fellow shooters. He said that male gun owners can be:

> A little intimidating . . . most of the time they [male gun owners] are more hyper masculine. And I don't know exactly where that's coming from . . . They would never *choose* to walk into [the LGBT] community . . . In some cases, I think people are willing to be more open and evolved about LGBT stuff, some are not willing to go there.

Unlike Helen, Nathan thinks that the acceptance of the LGBT community in the shooting world is begrudging and slow. Only the head of the San Diego County Gun Owners knows that he is transgender and he'd prefer to keep it that way. There are clearly differing experiences of being gendered in the 2nd amendment community in San Diego. Joan is relentlessly positive about her progress in winning over gun owners, while Helen says there have been good and bad times in her role within the organisation. Nathan is the most sceptical and the least public about his identity. When I asked Nathan how his transition to living full time as a man affected his perceptions of personal safety he replied:

> In fact, transition made it safer for me. You know [prior to transition] I would never ever dream of going out at night to an ATM machine. I could do that and no-one would blink. You know I could walk down streets that women would be very uncomfortable doing and I can do it and no-body knows . . . you know, if I look at somebody in the eye, they avert their eyes, where they didn't before . . . So, I mean I feel safer in this identity than I ever was in that identity. I'm still cautious but it just feels different.

For Nathan, passing as a man has changed the way people treat him, freeing him from many of the anxieties he used to have while moving through public spaces. However, transition has brought with it new physical vulnerabilities. His long term use of a testosterone supplement has put a strain on his heart and has led to some major medical interventions. He has had to stop taking the hormone as a result and is worried that he may begin to look less like a man and return to a feminine physical form. This is a concern he expresses in terms of existential safety. The respect he feels he draws as someone who passes as a man may disappear and stop giving him the protection that he needs.

Nathan's story echoes the account of Sonny Nordmarken (2014) discussed above. As a transgender man, Nordmarken also experienced the strange sense of acceptance and physical welcome that accompanies a perceived male identity. But, that acceptance is tempered by experiences of social alienation following public displays of confusion by those who are unsure of how to label his gender. This fluctuation between how he is perceived and how he presents creates an experience of anxiety, fear, and hypervigilance (2014: 38). Nathan has developed his own response to a similarly precarious sense of safety. As he worries about the prospect of being perceived as feminine or non-binary again, he has come more and more to rely on the presence of his firearm for protection.

Carrying a gun has a transformative effect on "being in the world" (Csordas 1994; 10). As Charles Springwood has suggested of his gun owning informants in the mid-west, firearms merge with the body, transforming the boundaries around which a person is defined, "the gun becomes what one is, not what one has" (2007: 22). A focus on embodied experience can addresses criticisms of social constructionist approaches that might exclude or alienate some transgender individuals who say they have found their true gender identity through transition (Papoulias 2006: 232). Paying attention to non-binary experiences can illuminate the ways in

which normative formulations of gender do not map onto the ways that gender is actually practised on a day to day basis (Hines & Sanger 2010; Nordmarken 2014). Defensive firearm use provides a window into how narratives of embodied vulnerability and belonging in the body are constructed. These narratives incorporate the gun's proposed protective qualities as a way of anchoring shifting gendered identities. This shows how integral gun ownership can become to a person's sense of self.

The concept of "vulnerability" is used strategically to argue for increased access to firearms in public forums. A claim to gender identity that links to a need to defend one's life is not just political tool, but also a reflection of a lived experience. This shows the value of focusing on the body in trying to understand political and even ethical behaviour. The men I got to know often made arguments about their vulnerability and as a researcher I probed into what they were saying, trying to get a sense of the embodied experience of this expressed fear. I often felt that these statements were mostly hypothetical in nature, that they were predicting or imagining the experience of vulnerability. The same statements from my trans interlocutors who had experienced violence felt different. I would find myself with tears in my eyes as they spoke with emotional honesty about what particular triggers in the world might spark fear. However, my perceptions of something that might be called "authenticity" were ultimately just my own interpretation of someone else's story. Yet, vulnerability was a salient category within the organisations I spent time with. It was during a return trip to California in 2018 that I noticed how dominant vulnerability as a narrative had become among gun rights activists in San Diego.

Vulnerability

Perceptions of gendered vulnerability relate to the subjectively experienced world as well as the political contexts within which it is operationalised. Firearms have long been used as props by men that create a sense of safety in a world portrayed all around them as dangerous (Kohn 2004; Cox 2007; King 2007). Here I want to suggest that this can also be the case for women and transgender people. The women I met in gun rights activist communities shared concerns with my trans interlocutors that they are at a disproportionate risk of attack and draw on their own experiences of threat when assessing their likelihood of being assaulted.

I found that many of the women I got to know in San Diego started learning how to shoot because of specific experiences of threat that made them consider purchasing a weapon for self-defence. Some had been followed by strangers, others had been emotionally or physically abused by partners and were committed to never letting it happen again. Alison, a local pro-gun politician, spoke of the trauma she experienced at the hands of kidnappers. She had several experiences of violence in her 20s and 30s that led to a renewed commitment to fighting for gun rights, especially for women. Alison cites this as one of the reasons that she decided to enter into local politics and is currently considering a run for state senate with the backing of San Diego County Gun Owners. Alison's experiences with suffering provided her with a more urgent ethical motivation to defend the right to bear arms.

My interlocutors claim that carrying a gun gives them an embodied sense of safety. Their experiences of fear and vulnerability led to a desire to ensure that they would be able to protect themselves if they were put in those positions again. The rhetoric of gun rights advocacy provides a structuring narrative of invulnerability that places meaning onto their experiences of violence and shows that they have the ability to prepare for future attacks. With this new way of imaging the future they find a practical method of training their bodies to meet threats to their physical safety. This an example of 'strategic essentialism' (Spivak 1988) that utilizes masculine experiences of crime to articulate gendered vulnerability that they claim can be countered by training with a firearm. These arguments create a new "safe" body and emphasize a kind of invulnerability that accompanies carrying a firearm. But this invulnerability is not a permanent state of affairs. The need to strive for security shows that there is an underlying embodied fear that accompanies many of my transgender interlocutors in their everyday lives. The addition of a firearm has not been a salve to their sense of insecurity.

Following a personal experience with danger or violence, people often have to imagine a new way of life for themselves that takes into account the possibility that the traumatic event may reoccur (Mattingly 2014). This process can cause one to take a critical evaluation of one's life, character, relationships with others and community. Creating a coherent narrative that emphasizes a past vulnerability that has been dispelled through access and training with a firearm helps to overcome traumatic events from the past. This seems to be true of Helen and Nathan whose close encounters with violence represent a rupture in their lives that created a strong imperative to prepare for violence. In the rhetoric of national gun rights advocacy, they

found a method of doing so that also brings with it an awareness of the vulnerability of the body and on the worst aspects of human behaviour.

Personal testimony can move people in ways that academic or political analyses of the social and economic costs of gun ownership cannot. Leaders in the gun rights community in San Diego recognise that first person testimonies from women and the transgender community have the power to change people's minds. They represent living breathing and emotionally salient proof of the positive impact of guns in society. The power of these stories lies in their mythical, folkloric, and personal character. Passed orally between communities of gun owners, stories of threat emphasize the danger of "bad guys" who wield guns to intimidate. To the uninitiated these tales could be interpreted as warnings about the dangers of guns in amateur hands. But, the take away lesson from each personal testimony affirms that owning a gun and learning how to use it can be an empowering process. It is seen as a way of overcoming fears generated by contact with threat to cultivate a sense of safety.

Conclusion

My transgender informants claim that they have a particularly urgent need for firearms because of perceptions of vulnerability induced in the process of transition. The ability to skilfully wield a firearm converted a hierarchy in capacities to enact violence to one of equality in which the vulnerable female form suddenly gained the explosive ballistic capacity to resist aggressors. The unexpectedness of this capacity is said to give my transgender informants an advantage in a dangerous world that does physically assault them in greater numbers than the general population.

A particular interpretation of femininity and masculinity is mobilised by men, women, and transgender shooters alike in the political contexts within which they argue for the benefits of owning a gun. However, this mobilisation derives its authority from first person experience, giving the arguments an emotional impact. Gun owners run over imagined scenarios of threat in their heads again and again as they train themselves to shoot aggressors. But, as the next chapter will discuss in more detail, first person experience with firearms can alter embodied perceptions of threat.

Through regular training guns interact with the body to create new psychological and physiological states. These embodied states carry with them ideological orientations towards what constitutes good ("good guys") and evil ("bad guys") that provides a lens through which my informants interpret perceptions of danger when walking around in public with a gun at their hip. Guns are inconsistent ethical tools that can promote safety and equality in the hands of "good guys", or fear and oppression in the hands of "bad guys". My interlocutors challenge their own framework of gender by proving that women and transgender people can be protective, violent, and strong, but they reassert traditional norms as they can only do so by appropriating those violent aspects of masculinity that guarantee their safety. The gun seems to stand in for masculinity as a representation of both violence and safety.

The physical aspects of learning to shoot – the roughness of the palms, burns from spent brass casings, the harsh bucking of the weapon - are further embodied proof that violence is an inherent part of life. This leads to an emphasis on the likelihood of danger when imagining potential futures. In the next chapter, I show how an "ethical subjectivity" is created through the cultivation of the skills needed to wield a gun effectively that transforms "vulnerable" transgender bodies into "safe" bodies that can repel attackers. Only by wielding personal means of violence can my transgender informants become safe.

Firearms training institutes, the weapons industry, and gun rights activist organisations have a vested interest in making the world appear as dangerous as possible, thereby motivating supporters to buy more guns or donate to their cause. Many of my informants regularly digest a media diet of Fox News or online platforms like Breitbart that explicitly stoke anxieties about Islamic terrorism and gang conflicts on American streets that perpetuates the desire to carry a gun in public. A social group of likeminded gun owners also reinforce this embodied, day to day sense of vulnerability. In my fieldsite a combination of factors have brought traditionally opposed communities together around a shared interest. Whether for good or ill, the integration of my transgender informants into the conservative gun rights activist community in San Diego shows how new identity categories can shift around long standing American institutions like gun ownership, creating new formations in how one defines belonging.

In the next chapter, I give a more in-depth ethnographic perspective on how gun owners train to shoot and kill potential aggressors at the intensive shooting courses that they attend throughout the year. I will show how the myths and historical consciousness of my informants

described in chapter two emerge in an ethical subjectivity conditioned by gun use. The physiological states that develop as one carries a gun work to define how the world is experienced on a moment to moment basis. The attention given to the potential for violence in everyday life leads to particular interpretations of how dangerous society actually is. In this mind-set only a few things matter; that you defend the safety of yourself, your family, and your immediate community.

Chapter. 4

Fear, Loathing, and Defensive Shooting in Las Vegas

It is late March and I am sitting in a car filled with ammunition and firearms on my way to a cross-dressing convention in Las Vegas, Nevada. Beside me sits Joan, a 62-year-old transgender-woman. Absent only the mind-altering substances, Joan and I are as unlikely a pair as Hunter S. Thompson and his attorney in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in their frantic pursuit of the American dream. Like Thompson, our journey began at the California coast and has taken us through miles of desert. Like in his absurdist classic of Gonzo journalism, the conversation revolves around America and where one might find it or, more importantly, look for it.

Joan and I have been talking for hours - when she bought her first gun, the process of transition she has gone though over the last seven years, how her wife, kids, and the conservative gun owning community reacted to her new identity. Her memories seem well rehearsed, like she has told them as stories many times before. Or, it might just be that they are important to her self-concept and are therefore familiar narratives. In her relentlessly positive way, Joan is also trying to persuade me of the value of gun ownership. She has often told me that I should write a thesis that shows "gun culture" in a positive light, even suggesting that I should consider buying a firearm when I return to the UK.

We are travelling to Nevada for two reasons. First, Joan is teaching a firearms safety class at a cross-dressing convention that she has been going to for decades. She hopes to convert some of her fellow convention-goers into gun owners by giving them a comfortable first time shooting experience. Second, Joan and I are attending a four-day defensive handgun course in Pahrump, Nevada along with 200 other San Diego residents in an event promoted and organised in connection with San Diego County Gun Owners.

This annual charity shoot brings gun owners together outside of the normal routines of suburban city life so that they can get to know each other better while learning the intricacies of tactical shooting. I have been hearing the name of the firearms training facility, Frontsight, whispered like a mythical promised land throughout my fieldwork and now I'm on my way to this much-anticipated yearly ritual. As my main firearms instructor over the last six months, Joan has been looking forward to this, indicating that it is going to be a real test of what I have learned.

Practising Ethics

In this chapter I explore how the values, mythologies, and ethical attitudes that my informants characterise as quintessentially "American" are embedded within the body through immersion in a four-day defensive handgun course. Gun owners spoke explicitly about ethics throughout my fieldwork as they discussed and acted out potential scenarios in which they might use a gun in self-defence. I use the term "ethics" throughout this chapter as an emic category that was defined by my interlocutors in personal discussion and seminars designed to explore the ethical implications of using a gun in self-defence. One shooting instructor at Frontsight made a clear distinction between morals ("what you personally think is right and wrong") and ethics ("which is the morals of the community"), and explained that, "you press the trigger based on your morals, but are judged by the community's ethics". Ethics take on a life beyond the individual, creating a system within which moral behaviour occurs and references a wider community of interest.

These gun owners show how ethics can be located in both written codes and principles, but also in embodied action and practice (Lambek 2010). Ethical systems permeate the everyday lives of social groups and it is through habit that ethical subjects (Faubion 2011) are created

within an environment of social and conventional ethical institutions. This perspective draws on Aristotelian notions of ethics that emphasizes the importance of habitual behaviour in forming moral attitudes, "we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts" (1941: 592-593). Socially prescribed ways of being ethical form the scaffolding around which the self is realised through bodily habits (Mahmood 2003: 855). If ethical orientations can be cultivated through physical practise, this suggests that they can also be taught. Frontsight firearms training institute explicitly sets out to do this, by training students in both an embodied habitual capacity to live their interpretations of ethics, but also in reflexive conversations about ethics.

My interlocutors form an ethical subjectivity as they carry a gun in public spaces with the knowledge that they might have to use deadly force if they encounter a "bad guy". Empowered by a unique awareness of the body formed around a five stage theory of physiological response to threat that is taught at defensive courses, they go back into their communities with new methods of embodied discrimination. This allows my interlocutors to feel that they can distinguish between "good guys" and bad guys" based on bodily evidence.

Ethics and politics go hand in hand (Mahmood 2003: 844 - 846). In this group of gun rights activists, ethics become bodily experiences that form habits of behaviour which in turn solidify into subjectivities that reference political goals. Processes of othering are mobilised to provide the discursive framing for ethical behaviours. This fits into the kinds of right-wing narratives that permeate the group of gun owners that I spent time with. My interlocutors use a moralising discourse that positions gun ownership as a positive ethical choice that secures individual safety from dangerous criminals, thus removing them from the often referenced category of victimhood. Joan strongly rejects the label of victim whenever possible. This motivation comes from an intersection of her identity as a white, conservative gun owner and her status as a transgender woman among gun owners who variously struggled with or accepted her place in the group.

Guns are also seen as a way of defending loosely defined American values like individual sovereignty and liberty from larger existential threats. These threats are rarely explicitly articulated yet I often heard gun owners muttering anxiously about Islamic terrorism, immigration from South America, or civil unrest in predominantly African-American neighbourhoods across the United States. This ethnographic context shows that ethics cannot

be divorced from how people make political judgments. In the perceptions of fear and empowerment that come from learning to shoot, my interlocutors construct a world in which guns are necessary to defend their lives.

Donald Trump's equally fearful narrative of America therefore appeals to them in a visceral way. Rather than representing a sphere of rational debate, the spaces within which the politics of gun rights is enacted and conceptualised takes on a deeply moral tone. At the defensive shooting course that I attended, my interlocutors explored the ethical implications of shooting a person in self-defence and enacted these scenarios in repeated physical drills that trained the body to automatically apply deadly violence to a perceived threat. These courses give social legitimacy and embodied experience to my interlocutor's sense of ethical responsibility as a protector of society.

Throughout this chapter I show how the dichotomous construction of good versus evil is reaffirmed by shooting courses that physically change a person's capacity to perceive threat. This then becomes the perceptual prism through which personal safety and moral character is assessed on a day to day basis. By understanding what evil looks like to gun owners, one can understand more fully why they respond the way they do when that evil rears its head in the form of mass shootings. In the final part of this chapter I look at responses to the 2017 Las Vegas mass shooting by gun rights activist groups in order to demonstrate how an ethical system that is cultivated in the body is deployed in public debates to explain such events.

Becoming Safe

I first met Joan in early November after Michael Schwartz sent an introductory email to his board members about my research. Joan responded immediately and invited me to her local range the following week. When I arrived for our meeting, Joan came out to greet me with hearing protection propped above her ears and plastic glasses over her eyes. We took a seat in the "VIP Lounge" accessible only to "platinum" members of the range and one of the first comments she made was, "so, something you should know about me, I haven't always been Joan". She explained that she has been transitioning towards living as a woman over the last 7 years. Her direct approach to addressing this topic set an open and honest tone for our relationship that continued through many long, sometimes difficult conversations.

Before we entered the shooting area Joan insisted that I learn the safety rules for handling weapons off by heart and we practised them with a plastic gun. As we took our place in one of the shooting lanes Joan slotted a handgun into the holster at her waist. She noticed me watching and told me in an exaggerated stage whisper that the staff at this range like her to carry a gun at all times so that she is ready to "handle the situation in case any of the patrons do something stupid". She used this opportunity to show off her shooting skills. Moving up to the firing line she drew her gun in a blur, pointing it at the target and firing a quick pair of shots down range. I looked for where they had landed on our skittle shaped target but couldn't locate them. Joan nudged me, winked, and pointed at the lower left-hand corner where both shots had left a hole in the number 0 of the target serial number. I was impressed and more than a little intimidated.

Joan was a patient and attentive teacher. After adjusting my stance several times and moving my grip on the weapon she told me I am ready to shoot. As instructed, I checked the chamber and magazine-well to make sure they are empty before inserting a loaded magazine and racking the chamber back. As I tentatively fired several rounds, Joan shouted over the cacophony of sound to tell me I was doing "fucking awesome!", fist bumping me whenever I managed to hit close to the centre of the target. Her energy was infectious and despite the fact that my technique became less controlled as my hands tired in the two hours we spent shooting, I came away from the experience feeling something close to elation.

Teaching people how to shoot is one of Joan's great joys in life. She regularly volunteers to teach at outreach events for San Diego County Gun Owners. I watched at these events as she prowled behind the firing line, ensuring that everyone is safe, offering tips about technique, or just giving hugs to nervous participants. Her love of teaching, like for many of my interlocutors, comes from a genuine concern for people's safety. What might seem like a dangerous practice from an outsider's perspective can be seen from within as a deeply ethical commitment to protect others.

Joan was born on a Navy base in San Diego to a military family before being raised in La Mesa: a city just east of San Diego. She encountered firearms for the first time at scout camp, developing an immediate affinity for shooting and later joined her high school rifle team. She went on to compete in regional and national shooting competitions, only narrowly missing out on a place in the 1980 US Olympic Team. A love of military science led Joan to study chemical engineering at university and for most of her life she has worked as an engineer for the military.

She talks fondly of times that she was able to test out new weapons technologies and seems to have a passion for explosives.

Joan bought her first personal firearm – a Winchester rifle - just four days after she passed the legal age limit of 18, but kept it hidden from her parents who she worried would not approve of keeping a gun in the house. However, after purchasing a handgun aged 21, firearms quickly took on a role as defensive tools for Joan:

> When I worked at Jack In The Box [a fast food chain] I used to hide it [a handgun] because people would throw Cherry Bombs [a kind of firework] in the door, attempting to rob us . . . none of my employers would allow me to have it there, but at 3 o'clock in the morning it's kind of difficult to explain to a junkie why you don't want to give them your money.

These personal experiences of threat create narratives that confirm the reasoning behind owning firearms for defensive purposes. Joan characterises the perpetrators of violence as somehow pathological, the term "junkie" used to remove any context or sociological explanation for violent behaviour. And yet conversely, her own use of firearms has necessarily involved breaking social and institutional rules, hiding guns from her parents, her employers, and others who might disapprove. Joan's capacity to reveal aspects of what she has called her "authentic self" seems to be in tension with how she believes society will react to those behaviours, whether that be in relationship to her gendered identity or carrying firearms in public.

When I arrived at Joan's house to prepare for our trip to Nevada, I came to fully appreciate what it means to live *with* guns. She has over 40 of them. Some hanging on bedroom door hooks, others overflowing out of draws along with items of clothing or stacks of files. One is mounted above her front door - a Civil War rifle that one of her ancestors wielded during the conflict. Next to a coat rack by the door sits a glass case of wooden handled hunting rifles and WW2 service weapons.

As she showed me around her home, occasionally she would exclaim, "Oh! You'll like this!" disappearing behind a door only to re-emerge with a particularly noteworthy gun. She talked to me about many of these weapons in detailed stories that often evoked emotions as she recalled a particularly fun day shooting with her family or thought about the person who gave

it to her. She takes pride in telling stories about each of her guns, how and when they were made, particularly unusual features, how she acquired them, where it is best to fire them. These objects evoked narratives about who Joan is and what is important to her – family, friends, military service, self-defence, and gun rights activism. She has nearly fifty firearms in total and after an extensive tour of her ammunition making facilities in an out-house she tells me that I haven't even seen the one's she keeps stashed in secret locations in case someone breaks into her house.

Since her transition to living full time as a woman, Joan has become heavily engaged with conservative politics and in 2016 was elected President of the Log Cabin Republicans (a national pro-LGBT conservative wing of the Republican party) in San Diego. She was the nation's first ever transgender delegate to a state senate in 2017 when she attended the California Republican Party's convention in Sacramento (the state's capitol). Despite some hesitations about the intrusiveness of the media, she is considering a run for state senate. As a staunch Trump supporter, Joan has had to face criticism from many of her LGBT friends. This was especially apparent following any announcement from the president that he would be modifying laws that allow transgender people to serve in the military (BBC News, 2017) or that interfere with policies that create gender neutral bathrooms (Willon, 2017). These moments often shook the uneasy alliance between many of my conservative LGBT interlocutors and the president.

Joan complained about an unwillingness in the LGBT community to face what she sees as the harsh realities of life:

> The LGBT world is extremely liberal, I mean fanatically liberal, and they're taught from a young age, a young existence, that they're victims basically and that's a mindset that's hard to get over . . . We are kind of in a target environment. We are definitely not the norm and people tend to target the non-norm. And erm, but on the other side of that, I'm not generally the most easy target, it's all about how you present yourself in the world. If you look like a victim, you're gonna be a victim, if you don't present yourself as a victim, people will just think, "oh this one's gonna be too hard, I'll move onto the next one".

Avoidance of being a victim animates much of Joan's orientation to the world. She tells me that she has seen good people fall victim to "bad guys" too many times and refuses to let it happen again. This is why she carries a gun everywhere she goes. It is why she scanned every room she walked into and would request to sit at particular tables that face the door whenever we ate in public together:

> It's the whole combat mindset, you know, you have to be ready to do whatever you've got to do in order to protect your life. When you walk into a room and you figure out how you're going to kill everyone in the room and never intend to do it. And now if a guy pops up in a room then you know what to do to deal with it. You get into the habit of reading a room . . . I don't know if you've ever noticed it, I'm pretty subtle about it.

In Joan's view, there are pathologically evil bad guys in the world. Ethically minded and strong individuals willing to protect those unable to defend themselves are required to keep people safe. Forming the "habits of reading a room" as well as the capacity to respond with deadly violence is key to her sense of safety as a transgender woman in a world that may discriminate against her.

Cross-Dressing Shooters

Joan and I arrived in Las Vegas after our long drive through the desert and checked into our hotel room. Unlike California, Nevada is an open carry state and Joan uses this opportunity to strap on a tactical belt and holster. Slotting a handgun snugly at her hip she leans back and says, "ah that's better. I feel whole again", as if a great psychological weight has been lifted.

Ordering an Uber, we drove along the Las Vegas strip taking in the reproductions of buildings from around the world. An Eiffel Tower sits across the road from the New York skyline and in the distance a Pyramid of Giza made of black glass rises to a dominating peak, its sparkling surface drawing magpie-like gamblers. The driver dropped us off next to the Venetian hotel where we passed through gambling halls filled with chiming bells and the sound of coins falling from slot machines. I noticed corseted waitresses walking in the aisles with glasses balanced on trays, barely able to muster a contractually obliged smile for the lecherously drunk customers that they served. An indoor river runs through the hotel's shopping mall and replica

Venetian gondolas skate across the water beneath a painted blue ceiling dotted with holographic clouds that shimmer as we pass.

We entered a nearby restaurant behind a Roman fountain that Joan boasted is the same size as the original in Italy. She immediately greeted old friends in the crowd gathering for the convention welcome dinner. She introduced me to Audrey, a close friend of hers, who she describes as one of the best shooting instructors in the world. Audrey is transitioning to living as a woman, but has experienced rejection from friends and family. She worries that the southern-state shooting community that she is a part of won't accept her. Later, Joan says that she helped Audrey to feel comfortable admitting her "true identity" to herself when they were both at a handgun course together.

Audrey has since attended this convention each year in order to open up new possibilities for self-expression. Gesturing to her body she tells me that she is thinking of retiring from teaching, "so I can pursue other parts of my life". Joan and Audrey joke that I will have to carry their firearms for them as they have lost their strength due to courses of oestrogen as part of their transition. The two have an intimate bond. They share a unique collection of traits. Both stand out as alternatives within the traditionally heteronormative-masculine world of shooting, determined to carve a place for themselves in a hobby they love. Yet both feel some exclusion.

As the dinner gets underway, I notice that many of the convention goers seem uncomfortable in their skin. Joan tells me that this may be the only time in the year when they cross-dress and that it can take a little time for them to relax into it. Joan on the other hand was as comfortable as ever and we get into a conversation with two attendees about why they should come to the shooting class tomorrow. They seemed sceptical and early on they identify as liberals to explain their hesitation, but Joan focuses on the experience of shooting rather than the politics, saying, "for me it's like a yoga. You have to know your breathing, pay attention to your heartbeat so you shoot at the right time. Inhale [she takes a breath], exhale [she breathes out slowly], release." Shooting plays an important physiological-psychological role in Joan's life:

> The whole effort of, especially precision shooting, but pretty much all of it, is about knowing exactly what your body is doing . . . So, you need to be in complete control and understand what's going on in your body. Gee, that's yoga! So I kind of came up with the silly term called gun yoga . . . [It] takes such concentration and so if you get all that,

> if you get your breathing down, I can feel my heartbeat in my ears. I can feel it right here [pointing to her ear]. And if I have high blood pressure I can feel it, I can slow it down . . . it's a very mental game. The physical parts become muscle memory.

With the two liberal conference attendees listening closely, Joan uses an example from her life when shooting helped her to deal with stress. She says that during her university degree she also worked full time to pay tuition, causing her to be exhausted and stressed. But, shooting, she claims, helped her to unwind:

> Before finals [exams] every single quarter [semester], I'd jump in my car or motorcycle and drive up to the mountains and I'd shoot for half a day, feel my trigger finger and all that stuff. Its very relaxing for me. In fact, when I was in college . . . it relaxed me completely. I'd come home and be able to fall asleep right away.

Shooting opens a dialogue between mind, body, and environment, creating a sense of conscious connection to the body that Joan compares to states achieved during a yoga practice. Joan says that she is able to pinpoint aspects of her physiology that are not usually within the reach of conscious attention. Shooting temporarily shuts down narrative construction of the moment and instead brings full and steady awareness to the activity at hand. This may be why shooting can counter-intuitively produce perceptions of peace and contentment for my interlocutors.

After dinner we returned to our hotel in a taxi. Joan tells the driver why we are in town and the two get into a friendly conversation about who owns the most guns. I am exhausted after a day of listening closely so sit back and tune out their egoic sparring, instead taking in the city. Flashing signs light up the sky and I can hear the too-sweet sound of country music playing over the traffic. Turning a corner, a black tower loomed in front of us topped with the gold letters, "T-R-U-M-P". The president's brand watching over the city Sauron-like, projecting a power that felt satirical. Hunter S. Thompson looked for America in Las Vegas, but found an exaggerated shadow image that brings together the social attitudes of a fading 1960s social tolerance with all of the gaudy excesses of capitalism.

Open Carry in Pahrump

Pahrump is a desert town on the border of Nevada and California. It consists of one straight road with hotels, casinos, and a few small residential areas branching off towards snow-capped mountains to the north. As we arrived a strong wind was blowing cold air down from those peaks, clashing with the dry heat of the desert. We unloaded the weaponry from Joan's car into our shared hotel room as sand began to roll over the town in great waves of grey-brown dust.

Joan began to lay out her firearms on her bed and while loading one of the weapons with a mischievous smile on her face she told me, "you know, the liberals call us ammo-sexuals and they think it's an insult. But I'm reclaiming it – I'm a proud ammo-sexual". In describing her love of guns as a kind of physical, carnal pull akin to her sexual preference, the gun is reflexively and with no small amount of sarcasm, incorporated into Joan's body – into the domain of the self.

Joan has promised me that I will carry a gun for the four days that we are in Pahrump. Handing me a Glock 17 that I'll be using she says, "if I see you being stupid with this, or handling it badly, I'll take it back. This is your responsibility". I cautiously put on my tactical belt, attaching the magazine pouch and holster. She tells me to load the gun and I feel suddenly very anxious. Facing the hotel wall and keeping my finger outside of the trigger guard I go through the chamber check before loading the firearm with a full magazine. I then ease the gun back into the holster and turn around to face Joan who looks at me with pride and says, "It's like fucking for the first time, a little uncomfortable at first, but then it gets good".

Joan defines this as a "dry run", a test of sorts, and that she will handle any dangerous situations that might arise. But, I wonder, if this is the case why did she have me load it? Couldn't I have the same experience of carrying a gun without the danger that it might go off? It may be that a loaded firearm provokes a greater sense of responsibility. If the stock, barrel, chamber, and slide are an engine, the ammo is the fuel that makes it run. A gun without ammo is like a human body without blood - cold and lifeless. Where before I saw only black metal and plastic (an object), now I see something coiled and ready to strike (a subject). My experience of being taught to shoot reaffirms this idea. Extra caution is taken when guns are loaded. There are always a set of rules and spatial segregations about where a gun can be loaded and subsequently pointed at a shooting range.

Figure 5

A tingling sensation comes over me now that I am carrying a deadly weapon. The gun seems to emanate a kind of vibration that pulses through my whole body from the point it sits on my hip. I am hyper aware of its weight and find myself more alert, compulsively glancing around at people, checking the gun is still safely holstered. I am not concealing the weapon because Nevada is a Constitutional Carry state, which means you don't need a permit and so I felt like people were looking at me in fear. That may be because I was self-conscious of the image I was projecting. Joan kept asking me, "are you feeling aggressive and angry yet", in a parody of what she sees as a biased media perspective that equates guns with violent behaviour. I am definitely not feeling angry. I want to be extra polite and non-threatening with everyone I meet. When Michael Schwartz arrives he takes one look at my tactical belt, holster, and handgun then laughs, "Joe! You can't go back to Scotland, you're the most American guy here".

I also felt nervous. I questioned my ability to carry a gun safely, asking myself, what if something happens and in the heat of the moment I decide to use it? Images flashed through my mind of violence. However, a more immediate worry was that someone could take it from me or that it could go off in my holster, sending a bullet grazing down my thigh and through my foot? My entire right leg in line with the angle of the gun's muzzle felt hot. I compulsively referenced the gun in my mind, checking that it was there by resting my elbow on the butt. It was an entirely new way of being aware of my body.

When I returned to the hotel later that night I un-holstered, unloaded, and placed the gun on a table with a sigh of relief. Joan says that I did OK for my first time carrying, but advises that I stop myself from constantly checking that it is still there. I found that first night mentally exhausting and physically painful at times. To want to arm yourself in public is to forgo obliviousness in favour of constant awareness. Assessing potential threats, aware of how lethal any interaction could be. This counter-intuitively produced a kind of calm as I became entirely absorbed in the moment, requiring that I hold a witness position as I watched events unfold around me.

Frontsight Firearms Training Institute

At 6:30am the next morning, Joan and I drove half an hour through the desert to Frontsight Firearms Training Institute. The first indication that we were approaching the shooting resort were twin flags, the stars and stripes and the Gadsden (a symbol of the Libertarian movement) flapping in the cold wind. The entrance to Frontsight is like a fortification - high embankments of dirt wall form a perimeter around the entire facility. Our identity is checked by a guard who opens metal gates to let us through. One of my interlocutors once joked with me that Frontsight, "looks like what all the anti-gun liberals are scared about, a walled compound full of gun nuts".

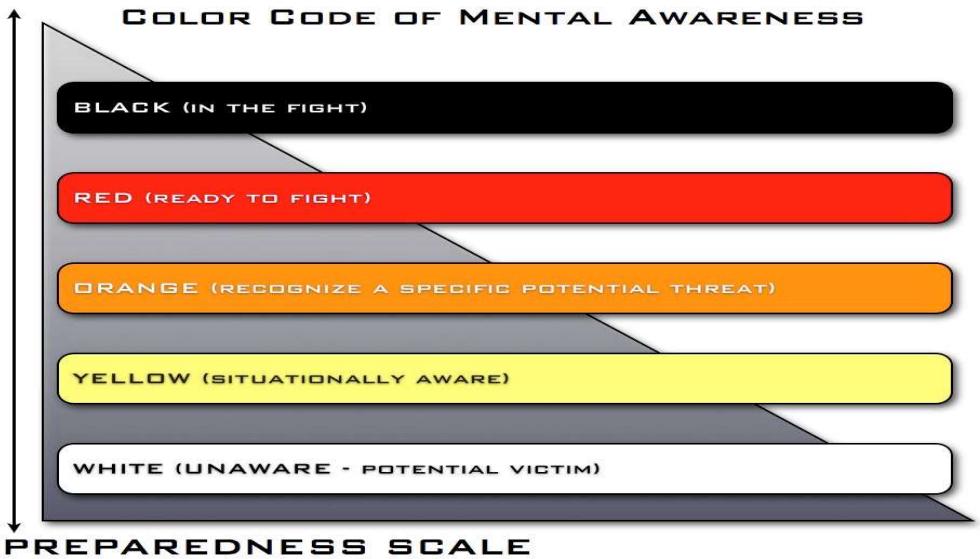
Figure 6

We submitted our weapons for a safety inspection before filing into a huge lecture hall that holds all 200 of the visiting San Diegans. We were welcomed with a half hour video with Frontsight founder and CEO Dr Ignatius Piazza who seems to love the way he looks with a gun. Several photos showed him dressed like James Bond holding a compact black handgun. In another he wore a James Dean-style leather jacket while shooting a shotgun. Joan snorts derisively at this, channelling my suppressed desire to laugh. According to Piazza, by taking a course at Frontsight, "you can become a hero in your community".

We break into smaller groups and are told to assemble at one of the outdoor shooting ranges. Huddled against the driving winds our lead Range Officer (RO) introduced himself. His foot was bound in a bright blue cast and for the duration of the training he hobbled around on a walking stick while trying to convey a misanthropic authority. He barked above the howling weather at us about safety, hard work, and dedication, but I could barely hear him - all I wanted was to get inside.

The rest of the morning was dedicated to "dry-firing", the practice of simulating shooing drills and tactical scenarios without loading the gun. This got our body used to the motions and thought processes that accompany "presenting" our guns from the holster (the tactical term for the classic Hollywood "draw"). This precise series of movements ends with eyes focused in on the target, front and back sights aligned for accuracy, hands gripping the gun with fingers on the trigger ready to fire, and with a controlled attention to the surrounding environment.

The militaristic, no-nonsense tone of the teaching riles my distaste for rigid hierarchy and an off-colour joke about cross-dressing from our RO puts Joan in a similarly anti-authoritarian mood. All of which contributed to my relief as we broke for lunch, reassembling an hour later for a lecture titled, "The 5 Stages of Mental Awareness". This theory of physiological and psychological states is popular among my interlocutors. Many of the training courses I attended use it as a guide for gun users that describes how they are likely to behave and feel throughout their day while armed. It is an attempt to prepare gun owners for the kinds of automatic bodily responses that arise when in threatening situations in the hope that those who choose to carry in public will learn to master those feelings. The lecture was given by one of Frontsight's female instructors who explained each stage in the hierarchy and how it relates to being in a gun fight.



"Condition white is characterised by a lack of awareness of your surroundings, your head is in the clouds, you're gazing at your cell phone, you are thinking creative thoughts". This

description contains within it several judgments about the kinds of behaviours that put gun owners in danger and they also happen to be behaviours associated with young people ("gazing at your cell phone") or liberals ("thinking creative thoughts"). In condition white, "we are an easy target, an easy victim. You will lose a gun fight in this state. This is not where you want to be". Condition yellow means being aware, checking the environment for threats but remaining relaxed. This, the instructor says, is how concealed carry holders should be at all times. She makes a point of saying that this is not paranoia, simply awareness of potentially dangerous people on the streets. Condition orange is the acknowledgement of suspicious activity, "you might feel like someone is up to no good, however, you need more information and shouldn't act, but instead form a tactical plan to respond to any potential threats". Condition red is when a specific threat has been perceived and it is real. There is "only one thing you have to do, set a mental trigger . . . if the bad guy turns towards you with a gun, you are ready to shoot".

Finally, the instructor says that condition black is:

> The ability to concentrate on the one thing you need to win, not just survive, you want to conquer, destroy. You've got to work on developing this mindset. Realise the world is a violent place. Understand your opponent, because they are not like you and me. They would cut off your head for your jewellery. You've got to be his worst nightmare. Visualise. Use your mind's eye. Create movies in your head about you and the bad guy. You have to see yourself winning.

While there are a number of themes to dissect here, the notion of victimhood and empowerment leap off the page as a stark opposition is drawn between the gun wielder, who uses violence for good, and the attacker who is seen as morally degenerate and motivated purely by a desire to inflict harm, using violence for evil or personal gain. This sets up the common opposition between "good guys" and "bad guys" that can be seen in the broader gun rights movement in the United States whenever a mass shooting occurs. It also justifies shooting those people when they strike, providing an ideological and ethical framework to accompany the physical shooting drills that we have been practising all morning. Similarly, this shooting instructor references an opposition between the kind of people who aren't ready for attack (victims) and those who are (defined as people willing to carry a gun in public). In this orientation to the world, the non-gun wielding citizen is coded as irresponsible and weak, both physically and morally.

This hierarchy of mental states helps gun owners to define their experiences of arming themselves in public, converting the anxiety and responsibility I felt while carrying for the first time in Pahrump into a morally charged guardianship of the spaces within which they move. Carrying a gun becomes a socially regulated way of attending to and with the body, creating particular "somatic modes of attention" (Csordas 1993). The very act of attending to the body in this way becomes ethically charged with the associations of victimhood (bad) and willingness to violently defend (good). The perceptions of danger, anxiety, and threat that arise from the act of carrying produces the conditions in which ethical action can occur. I watch as Joan makes decisions about where to carry her gun by referencing this 5 stage theory. Back at the hotel room that night she asks herself, "should I carry tonight? No, I want to be able to relax". She leaves it saying that there will be enough people at dinner who are carrying if something happens.

Processes of Othering

On the second day of the course we attend a lecture titled, "Moral and Ethical Decisions Associated with the Use of Deadly Force". The moustachioed instructor explains that it is necessary to fully consider the moral and ethical ramifications of carrying and using a gun in self-defence:

> Think carefully so that you know what you are prepared to do in the moment. Find a mental trigger. If you press that trigger that's gonna stay with you forever, but it's not the end of the world. You not coming home to your family is the end of the world.

The justifications for shooting people are often framed in terms of the need to protect innocents (nearly always coded as female, i.e. granddaughter, daughter, wife), from other men or "bad guys" who are described as pathologically evil. However, a more disturbing theme emerges as the instructor continues, "some scumbag is in your house, learn to sniff out bad guys, they probably stink. The probably live under the bridge in the bad part of town . . . they will kill you for the fried chicken in your refrigerator". He advises that if we were to ever get into a gun fight, check around once we have dealt with the immediate threat because, "rats travel in packs". There is an encouraged fear and loathing of a criminal "other" that is devoid of an awareness of any structural factors that may cause crime and poverty. Dehumanisation is

encouraged and seen as a necessary component of an ethical gaze. Both at Frontsight, but also in the gun rights movement at large, imagined threats in society are removed from their humanity and granted the status of monsters, thus justifying the use of deadly violence.

The next three days of the course reinforces these ideas. Physical drills aim to commit lessons about ethical action and bodily states into muscle memory, making gun owners capable of automatic response should a threatening situation arise. Our range instructor often repeats the adage, "train the way you fight and you will fight the way you train". One particularly disturbing drill involved presenting the gun from the holster and shooting the target twice in the "thorasic cavity" (where the vital organs of the body are located). The gun is then lowered to simulate a check to see if the aggressor has stopped attacking, before our instructor shouted "HEAD!" and we raised our weapons to take a single shot at the "cranial ocular cavity" (a rectangle around where the eyes of the target should be). We practise this drill for hours each day, slowly desensitizing me to the violence we are simulating. Our instructor suggests that we should, "think of the head shot not as a shot to take a life, but one to save a life, yours".

Joan echoes these ideas in many of our long conversations about gun ownership and she often showed a reflexive awareness of the ethical challenges that arise from carrying a gun in public:

> Well you can force yourself into complacency, but it's not something you ever want to become complacent about. It's the decisions you have to make, like, what is the line that has to be crossed before I do something about something, does it involve my people only, my family only? Does it involve anybody? If I see somebody having the daylights kicked out of them do I put my life at risk to save somebody I don't know or necessarily care about? . . . I mean it's a very very complex decision, so you can't judge somebody on that kind of a conscientious decision. What I consider doing and what somebody else would consider doing might be completely different . . . it's all about the training you've had and the decisions you have made and you have to make long before you ever get into a situation when you have 0.1 microseconds to do something . . . A lot, a LOT, of thought has to be involved.

However, when I ask when you might be justified in shooting someone, she has a similar tendency to dehumanise her imagined aggressors:

> The whole concept that a gun is an equaliser in an environment where physical dominance is so prevalent, you know, the bad guy wants to impose their will on you, they'll find a way to do it, because they are, by definition, a sociopath. They are going to find a baseball bat, their fists, their intimidation in size . . . The mark of a true psychopath is when they get their hands on a gun, or get their hands on a weapon and all of a sudden it makes them feel powerful and it gives them the ability to impose their will on other people. Whereas a non-psychopath, or normal human being, when they receive that level of power or opportunity to be able to be equal, it humbles you. Because, first of all, now you're saying, "OK, now I have a lot more power than the other people around me, but I don't want to impose my will on people, I just want to make sure no-one imposes their will on me". And that is a very very powerful place to be. First of all, you've acknowledged that you have the power over other people's lives in your hand and you have taken that responsibility and you understand that responsibility. And people on the bad side, don't get it that way, they think they can make somebody do what they want to do.

The very inability of a person to accept or feel the deep ethical responsibility of carrying a gun in public is evidence of their psychopathy and therefore proves that they are a "bad guy":

> Well, you have a new tool, which can do all sorts of great things, but it can do all sorts of bad things too. So, your brain is fighting with that whole thing. It's the same exact interaction for all gun owners, because it has the ability to project power, but you want to project power in a reasonable, sane way, you're not one of the bad guys, you're trying to protect against the bad guys . . . you still don't want to sink to their level. You know, if the threat is over, if someone's running away, you don't want to shoot them in the back. You are going to stand there, you're going to be ready to respond, you're going to check around to see if any of their rat pack friends are around about ready to smack you in the head . . . when the guy drops his gun and puts his hand on his face, you're not going to shoot him in the head because you are not a psychopath, but now you have the person under control you have the ability to have law enforcement come and get them, and prosecute the living daylights out of them.

Joan suggests that there is a fundamental difference between the kinds of people who can be trusted to wield the quasi-magical power of firearms and those who cannot. It depends on moral

character and training. Evil is a salient category for my interlocutors (Csordas 2013) who use it to explain instances of horrific gun violence that they struggle to incorporate within their understandings of gun use. What kind of people they consider to be evil can serve as an important marker for how they constitute the categories of human and in-human. Whenever a major mass shooting occurs sensational media coverage pushes the issue of gun control into public discourse, which is immediately followed by a response from gun rights organisations condemning that discourse.

Just months after my trip to Nevada the deadliest mass shootings in US history occurred in Las Vegas, killing 58 people and injuring over 400 outside a hotel. Days later Michael Schwartz issued a statement in response to the tragedy on behalf of San Diego County Gun Owners.

> I am sickened and saddened by the horrific mass murder that happened Sunday night . . . in Las Vegas. Reading about it, hearing about it . . . put a lump in my throat all day yesterday . . . we are also seeing elected officials . . . [and] "journalists" [quotation marks in original] . . . using this tragedy as an opportunity to advance their political agenda.

This was followed by a quote from a board member of the organisation, "There is no legislation that will strip evil from an immoral man". A statement by Wayne La Pierre and Chris Cox (2017) from the National Rifle Association followed the next day echoing many of these themes by condemning the evil of the shooter, rebutting calls for a conversation about guns, and taking a tone of disgust that anyone should try to politicize a tragedy - while politicizing it.

> In the aftermath of the evil and senseless attack in Las Vegas, the American people are looking for answers as to how future tragedies can be prevented . . . Banning guns from law-abiding Americans based on the criminal act of a madman will do nothing to prevent future attacks . . . The NRA remains focused on our mission: strengthening Americans' Second Amendment freedom to defend themselves, their families and their communities.

"Senseless" is a key word here. An evil that is beyond explanation or verbal analysis, literally absent of sense, locating the perpetrator in the realm of the inhuman. These responses may sound self-serving, but contained within them are many of the themes that constitute the lived ethical system I have been exploring in this chapter. They reference the kind of ideas that are

taught at Frontsight and reinforced through the physical practice of learning to shoot for self-defence, drawing dichotomies between good and evil, sane and insane, rational and senseless. These distinctions suggest that there are some instances of violence that are justified and some that are not and, to take this to its logical conclusion, that some people deserve to be met with violence. This sorts events into categories within a "continuum of violence" (Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2003). Where one sits on this continuum depends on characteristics such as class, race, age, and gender.

For my interlocutors, "sensible" forms of violence might include America's wars in the middle East, the force used by police officers against African-American protestors, or their own sense of entitlement to use deadly force when confronted with threat (Scheper-Hughes & Robben 2008). However, "non-sense" forms of violence include mass shootings, suicide, and gang violence. This avoids any need to look at the causes of violent crime or to design solutions that might interrupt cycles of poverty, racial oppression, or associations between successful masculinity and violence, and instead the proposed solution of arming "good guys" becomes a logical step in an argument for increased access to guns.

Bodily Ethics

On the final day of the course, everyone from San Diego gathered on a range for a group photo. There is an obvious bond of camaraderie among participants who are going through this challenging experience together. We are told that a combination of our attendance at this event and the purchase of raffle tickets has raised $27,000 for a leukaemia charity. The gathered crowd whoops and cheers in celebration. Michael Schwartz uses the opportunity to pitch San Diego County Gun Owners, asking that his board members come and stand at the front to be thanked. Joan marches up to stand behind Michael, beaming at the crowd, waving at some of the crowd who shout her name. Joan represents a non-traditional demographic in this group and yet has found a place among them with her joviality and willingness to teach shooting technique to anyone who seems open enough to accept her advice.

This course consisted of gruelling 11 hour days of shooting drills and lectures. Training camps, "are designed to form a sovereign, secluded and autonomous space disconnected from social and conventional life" (Saramifar 2017: 90). For four days Frontsight became the total institution within which new subjectivities and ethical orientations take root. By the end of the

final day my limbs felt like they had weights attached to them from the hundreds of times that I presented my gun from the holster. My palms formed rough calluses from the kickback and my trigger finger ached from constant use.

These movements had become embedded in muscle memory. I executed them with a calm precision that surprised me. The gun seemed to fit naturally in my hand and I was so in tune with this specific instrument that I could feel from the difference in its weight when it needed to be reloaded before I heard the click that indicated it was out of ammunition. If the gun jammed or the trigger failed to press, I was now able to diagnose the problem and quickly bring it back to functioning. These skills and sensations provide material evidence of my body's transformation and as one participant of the shoot told me, "if you don't have an aching trigger finger and cuts from working the slide then you're not doing it right". The knowledge a gun user has of their weapon has to be intimate.

My experiences of learning to shoot during my fieldwork suggest that what Joan says about yoga is true. You learn the correct stance for shooting down to the most minute movements designed to allow the wielder to still their body. My physiology moved in a wave with the process of firing a weapon. In the motions of focusing my awareness, becoming aware of my breath, and gazing steadily down the barrel I would enter stillness, which was then broken by the thunderous sound of the discharge that rippled through my body and set my ears ringing. Suddenly breathing more rapidly and with a tension dissipating throughout my body, I would pause to see where the shot had landed before focusing once again on the process of preparing to shoot, bringing my breath back into a slow rhythm.

When you pick up a sensation, whether through touch, sound, sight, smell, or taste, it meets your awareness. The body "turns towards" a sensation that it has perceived and in this initial act there is no distinction between subject and object (Merleau-Ponty 1945). Used to constructing wholes, this awareness immediately reflects on a history of similar perceptions it has dealt with that might help to explain what exactly is going on (Leder 1990). This categorises a sensation into a label that makes it sensible, placing it within a narrative of experiences of the world. Reflecting on a perception evokes a series of questions about it: do I like this? Am I safe? When will this stop? How long did it take to stop last time? Who is causing this sensation? My interlocutors use the frameworks taught by Frontsight to interpret their physiological experiences of carrying a weapon, but also reference an ethical system that prescribes deadly

violence if one recognises that an aggressor is evil. In this way, attention can be seen as an inter-subjective experience constituted in a relationship between external stimuli, perceptions, and reflective thought. The meaning that bodily experiences take on, "is to be found not primarily in representation but in presentation: modes of action or ways of life" (Jenkins, 2015, quoting Kirmayer, 1992: 380).

The group of shooters that I spent time with narrativize gun use within an ethical-political framework. This comes into contact with the embodied experience of carrying and using a gun which forms new physical habits that direct my interlocutors to respond to socially and historically constituted notions of threat. So a perception of threat or fear that a gun wielder may feel spontaneously is projected out into the world where evidence will always be found to back up an internal state. If a perceived threat can be given the form of an identifiable "bad guy" who embodies one or all of the features of unknown maleness, racial otherness, and poverty then a capacity to respond with deadly violence may lead to the activation of that response.

Dust Storms and Revelations

By the fourth day of the course I noticed that Joan was struggling physically. Her body was still recovering after gender alignment surgery just two months previously and she can't always cope with intense activity. She remains cheerful throughout and is thrilled when I received a good mark in the final skills test, waving and shouting, "fuck yeah kid".

On our drive back from the course we decided to avoid the freeway, instead getting on a back road that took us through miles and miles of mountainous desert terrain. A dust-storm began to whip up around us, coating the car in sand and making it hard to see much more than 20 metres ahead on the road. We were both exhausted, but were revelling in successful completion of a difficult task. Conversation turned to more personal matters as she told me about her transition. She said that over the last decade a number of life changing events helped her to decide to transition to living full time as a woman. Joan has two biological children from her first marriage, a son and a daughter, as well as an adopted son. One of her sons suffered from PTSD after leaving the military and the two became close while she cared for him. It was him who encouraged her to come out and pursue transition after decades of hiding this part of her

life from her friends and family. Her children have all been supportive of this process, helping her to adjust, but her relationship with her father remains difficult.

As Joan's aunt was dying, she told Joan that she was born inter-sex, but that she had no evidence of this, only small pieces of information her mother had given away. Joan's mother had died some years previously, which meant that she couldn't clarify these claims. She immediately began scouring medical records of the Navy base where she was born, finding a reference to an un-defined major surgery within the first few days of her life, accompanied by a long course of medication that Joan suspects could have been testosterone. Born in the mid-1950s, she believes that doctors advised her mother that they needed to "fix me, so that I could live out a normal life, and male being the preferred gender of the time, they made me a boy". Upon confronting her father with this information, Joan received an angry denial, but thinks that her mother kept it a secret even from him out of fear that he would not have accepted the child. As Joan grew older she began to feel less and less comfortable identifying as a man, which emerged in behaviours that she now believes were unhealthy.

With tears in her eyes she recounted being told by her father and brother that she would lose all of her friends if she were to come out as transgender. But her positive disposition returned as she focused on why she loves her fellow gun owners so much, saying that they have been unbelievably accepting of her:

> In the San Diego County Gun Owners there are people from literally every walk of life and really the only commonality is our love of shooting. . . But I'll tell you, the mixed groups are unbelievably, you now, embracing, and the men's groups you kind of have to prove yourself to get there, but in the women's group your just in . . . I think the best thing I ever did was win the shooting contest at the San Diego County Gun Owners barbeque last year . . . Yeah that was probably the best thing that could have happened in terms of me being in the group.

After participating in this four-day course, I was greeted more cheerfully at meetings and trusted to borrow a handgun from Joan for the remainder of my stay in the US. Joan's faith that her skills as a shooter can permit her entry into groups that might be sceptical of her gender identity seems to be borne out by her obvious popularity in SDCGO. This just shows the

importance of learning the skills of shooting to being an "insider" within this group. Both Joan and I had to prove this before being accepted.

We emerged from the dust-storm on the California side of the border and pulled over to fill the car with petrol. Joan looked around the gas station and told me, "you fill the car, I'm going to sit here with a gun". I look at her shocked, but used to following her orders by now, I got out and looked around. A group of bandana-wearing young Mexican-American men were parked at the next pump. After four days of being taught to shoot surrounded by smiling faces and enthusiastic gun owners, learning competitive drills, and discussing the ethical challenges of gun ownership, it was easy to forget that we were being trained to kill. As I considered Joan sitting in her car clutching a loaded firearm at a gas station, I am forced to remember the very real stakes at play in the world of defensive shooting and a phrase that she whispered to me during the lecture on ethics, "dying is a pretty dead-end way to go on living".

Conclusion

In this chapter I have begun to sketch out a framework for how the physical experience of shooting becomes a way of reinforcing ideological and ethical orientations to the world. As Joan shows, a life spent shooting guns for sport, but also training in self-defence can create links between a person's sense of embodied safety and a political fight to preserve the ability to legally own a firearm. In a combination of shooting drills and explicit ethical theorizing, my interlocutors create habitual methods of responding to perceived threats in society that reference contemporary and historical anxieties about the likelihood of experiencing violence and the kind of people who are likely to enact that violence. The fear of unknown "others" creates a loathing of those who come to symbolise and embody qualities that gun owners see as senselessly (as opposed to sensibly) violent.

In the next chapter I continue to explore bodily engagements with shooting in a different context – that of shooting sports - where the serious business of learning how to shoot enemies is converted into a game that allows gun owners to "play" with guns. In this activity they form different kinds of bonds based around competition, collaboration, and shared beliefs, yet the serious business of learning to shoot enemies is often seen as the primary reason for taking part in shooting sports. Even in contexts where engaging with guns is something to be enjoyed, the defensive mind-set cultivated at shooting courses like Frontsight persists.

Chapter. 5

‘It’s Just Fun’

As my fieldwork drew to a close I was able to interview Liz Hart, the head of a chapter of the Liberal Gun Club in San Francisco. Liz was getting ready to move to San Diego with her family and had established ties with both San Diego County Gun Owners and the Pink Pistols. Some of my interlocutors suggested that I talk to her for what they called her "unique perspective". As a constitutional lawyer, she spoke eloquently about the role of the 2nd amendment and private gun ownership as a right, but told me that there is another, more important reason that she owns guns.

> For me, it's totally about fun. It's really empowering. I mean it's one thing about the gun culture that doesn't really get portrayed in the media at all, or really talked about, is the fun side of it, right. It's fun to go to the range and shoot paper. We talk about self-defence, and tyranny, and Constitutional issues and all that, but we don't talk about the day to day, what we actually do . . . we bring our guns, we shoot all sorts of crazy stuff, and it's a lot of fun.

Many gun owners that I knew expressed similar sentiments, but Liz was the first person to state that fun could be a primary motivator for owning firearms. She led me to realise that many of the arguments I heard that reference self-defence and potential government tyranny are at odds with the way my informants actually enjoy firearms. As soon as I turned on my recording device in interviews, gun owners responded to questions with arguments that echoed national gun rights rhetoric, reproducing the specific binary language of the gun control debate. However, among the most common responses to my questions about what motivates people to shoot was the apparently simple phrase, "it's just fun".

Here, I want to explore how shooting a gun can be a part of a competitive game. As my informants took part in the serious business of learning to shoot enemies and defend their homes, they also created bonds with others by cooperating in shooting sports that test their skills in novel ways. Play is not just a mode of interaction that ends in childhood, it can have a role in forming adult relationships and social groups (Hamayon 2016). Play is a kind of universal "culture creating . . . modality of action (2016: 71): a capacity that allows humans to creatively engage with social belonging, ethical norms, and embodied knowledge. While games and styles of play vary, the modality of engagement remains universal (Hamayon 2016).

Shooting sports are a physical expression of one's capacities to enact violence. In this chapter I show how the rules of a game can prescribe or prohibit certain types of behaviours within a social context. Both competition and collaboration are necessary functions of any act of play. But, it is the bodily-ethical orientations discussed in the previous chapter that links this sport to the practice of defending one's life. Shooting sports incorporate play as competitors aim to improve their accuracy and speed with a handgun in stages that are set up to simulate a home invasion or hostage situation. Play can provide an analytically fruitful framing to unpack the juxtaposition between the serious work of learning to shoot enemies and the creative bonding that I saw emerge within a sports team that I spent time with. This playful exploration of physical capacities cultivates both a love of shooting while embedding political and ethical orientations within the body. In shooting sports, political activism (chapter one), historical representations of gender and nation (chapter two), anxieties about physical insecurity (chapter three) and ethical orientations (chapter four) come together in one social space.

I begin by exploring how sports shooters establish a "play frame" through a number of direct and indirect communications that are specific to the context of the competition, but that draw on everyday ethical concerns. I consider the links between these playful interactions and the serious work of training to shoot and kill potential aggressor, before focusing on the dual processes of competition and collaboration that are at work in this sports team. As teammates work together they use humour and insults to establish a hierarchy based on shooting skill which links to notions of successful masculinity. Sports shooters draw on militaristic metaphors and conceptualisations of violence in their sense of collective belonging. I end this chapter with a discussion of the ways play is used by San Diego County Gun Owners in their efforts to win over new members in events called Shooting Socials.

USPSA Rules and Regulations

My interlocutors compete under a national framework called the United States Practical Shooting Association (USPSA). According to its official website, it aims to "promote, maintain and advance the sport . . . in order to cultivate the safe recreational use of firearms" (ISPC Website). First practised in California, this style of sports shooting became popular during the late-1950s and the organisation's website claims that many of the techniques developed by participants have been adopted by the military and police. Competitors are ranked in a national

league of shooters that compete in different skill classes. Each participant earns a grade running from D to A, but they can also achieve the rank of master and finally grand master. Shooters move up a grade only when particular criteria of speed, accuracy, and consistency are met. The power of a weapon is also recognised, with higher calibres of gun - like the .45 – acting as multipliers on the score sheet.

Competing in this sport comes with a significant price tag. Each match is $40 to enter, which works out as roughly $1000 a year. On top of this, a shooter can go through as many as 250 rounds of ammunition in one match, which, depending on type, can cost between $50 to $100. Competitors may choose to start manufacturing ammunition to save on the weekly costs, but equipment can run into the thousands of dollars to buy. These regular expenditures also combine with the cost of buying a handgun – the model that I borrowed to compete in these matches is on the lower end of the price spectrum at $500**.**

Then there are the accessories – hearing and eye protection, holsters, modifications that improve accuracy, tactical belts, spare magazines, and magazine pouches. Clothing is also important. Trousers with deep pockets that run down each leg, sturdy shoes to navigate the desert terrain, and a pro-gun t-shirt or baseball cap are essential. This clothing can be bought at gun shops or at the many "tactical" supply stores around San Diego and while it's [rimary function is to store the many different accessories of a handgun, it also signals membership within the group. Participants have to have a significant amount of disposable income to compete.

In my time observing and taking part in USPSA matches, this team had only one female participant who came with her husband. Apart from this, the team was almost exclusively a male space. Most of them were white collar professionals with money to spare. I first encountered the sport through San Diego County Gun Owners board member Tom Palazzo who invited me to come and watch a match. The main aim of the competition is to shoot targets called "hostage takers" in order to "save" other objects labelled "hostages". The dichotomy between types of targets, speaks directly to a view of the world that divides humanity into "good guys" and "bad guys". Shooting sports provide a playful, embodied context in which to act out this ethical ordering. These ideas are evoked within a context that is separate from their day to day lives, allowing the reversal, but also reaffirmation of normative ethical principles: a space in which it is seen as morally commendable to learn to shoot people.

Establishing a 'Play Frame'

Bateson (1987) suggests that people express complex meta-communicative signals to initiate play. In games that simulate or involve actual violence, participants have to convey the message that "this is play" while seeming to initiate what looks like a real fight (as in boxing or shooting sports). The communication has to contain within it an expanded meaning that says, "these actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions *for which they stand* would denote" (Bateson 1987: 69, emphasis in original). This more specific message establishes a "play frame" into which the participants enter that also brings with it specific rules and norms of behaviour that can differ from or invert those of everyday life. Receiving a punch within the boundaries of a boxing ring means something entirely different that if one was at a pub.

A "play frame" then, is established either directly through collectively agreed upon rules or through meta-communications that lets participants know that they have entered into a game that does not operate by the rules of everyday life. The frame is a contextualising device that gives meaning to the actions within it. Explicit rules refer to what behaviours are acceptable within a game, although in practise they are often bent or broken by players with varying consequences. In sports shooting, the first indication that one is entering a different frame is in the physical separation from everyday life. On two Saturday's in each month participants converge on a rural shooting range an hour's drive from San Diego.

I first made this drive in October of 2016, passing avocado farms and ranches on roads that narrowed to single tracks as I approached the range. My small car struggled over pot-holes on a dirt road clearly built for the large trucks that many gun owners drive. Tom met me early that morning to talk me through the stages of the competition. The match is set up in six shooting bays divided by tall berms of dense mud. Within each is a set of targets that aim to replicate tactical scenarios, using shipping containers and netted walls to simulate home invasions so that the shooter has to hit hypothetical aggressors lurking behind imaginary doors and windows. Other stages are more whimsical, constructed around steel targets that ping and fall when struck by a bullet or rotating mechanisms that create a moving target. At the entrance to each bay wooden boards and corrugated iron structures have been made up to look like Wild West shopfronts. Some are decorated with famous names from American folklore like the "OK

Corrall", evoking Wyatt Earp's shootout in which he saved the town of Tombstone, Arizona from predatory cowboys.

The range sits on land owned by a local Indian Reservation and Tom explained that, "the Indians think we love the Americana stuff, but we know it's silly". This location creates an even greater sense of separation from everyday life. Tom claims that it is a popular range because the land is governed by tribal law, which means that the local police force does not have to acknowledge California's prohibitions on magazine capacity. There is a strange historical symmetry and inversion in this relationship - shooters (of predominantly Euro-American descent) arrive to live out their fantasies of frontier violence on tribal land. The uneasy relationship between the participants and owners is epitomised by the unwillingness of a local man to cease driving on a road on a hill behind the range even on competition days. As part of the morning safety briefing the competition organisers implore participants to stop shooting if they see a truck making its way across the hillside – a road well within the firing line of the range.

Figure 7

A play frame is established through legal, social, and even ethnic distance from middle-class suburban life. The sense of separation from everyday life is underscored by gun laws unique to the Indian reservation and the presence of important imagery from America's past. But, a frame is also established through bodily habits. As each competitor arrives at the range they open the trunk of their car, strap on a tactical belt, holster, and magazine pouches before slotting their handgun into place at their waist. This small action further separates shooters from everyday life and allows them to pull on whatever personality they want to inhabit while within the play frame.

At the time of my fieldwork most of my informants were unable to wear a firearm in public due to restrictions on concealed carry permits (see chapter six for a more detailed discussion), so this context also acted as a rare opportunity for gun owners to proudly show-off their firearms and feel what it is like to carry them in a social context. Displaying a firearm seemed to facilitate inclusion within the group. Before I competed in the shooting match, I was treated with suspicion, but an almost immediate sense of solidarity was created when I was finally able to borrow a firearm and take part. Where previously I had been treated as an outsider, suddenly other competitors would ask what team I was on and engage me in conversations that lasted longer than the time it took me to explain that I was a researcher.

The day begins with the morning "shooters meeting". As Tom showed me around on my first visit to the match, the competition organiser and Range Officer - the man in charge of keeping the event safe - shouted into a megaphone calling together the hundred or so shooters lounging in deck chairs, drinking coffee, and talking. In a California-inflected southern drawl he barked out the rules of the competition like they were orders, "anyone caught pointing their loaded weapon anywhere except down range will be DQ'd [disqualified and sent home]. Anyone who acts irresponsibly will be DQ'd. If I don't like someone's attitude, they will be DQ'd." The Range Officer makes it clear that there are tangible criteria for disqualification as he outlines the rules on the USPSA's website, defining what is deemed acceptable within the game. There are also particular dispositions or personality traits implied within these rules that are seen as favourable. The official USPSA rule book says the sport is for "persons of good character", suggesting that there is a correct way to behave that will be policed by the competition organisers.

Each team is also expected to adhere to and take these rules seriously throughout the match. I witnessed many disputes break out between men who disagreed about whether a particular rule had been broken. For example, if a shooter missed so badly that they damaged the structure of the equipment the rules say that they should be disqualified. At one match I observed, a new shooter put a bullet through a barrel that is used to hold targets in place. The referee stopped the man and after a debate with other team members decided to disqualify him from the stage rather than from the whole competition. Rules help to establish the boundaries of acceptable behaviour, but they are not so rigid that they cannot be negotiated. However, complete transgression of an established rule does weaken the play frame and results in debates about whether a rule violation entails disqualification or a simple telling-off.

Rules are essential components of the fictional social landscape of play. Rules create a frame that represents "a form of reality both separate from empirical reality and *in relation with it"* (Hamayon 2016: 67 emphasis in original). This produces interactions between players that can only occur within the frame and that reference or invert relationships, social structures, and hierarchies that exist in everyday life. There is a constant interference between different orders of reality. The imitation Wild West structures at the entrance of the shooting bays evoke particular historical interpretations while the tactical scenarios used in the competition reference a defensive mind-set cultivated by many of these shooters. Within the play frame of USPSA the participant is able to imagine that they are killing "bad guys" and saving innocents from harm, while also having fun.

Strategizing and Embodied Play

After the shooters meeting, teams separate into their assigned groups. Although it varied from week to week, Tom's team was made up of between ten to twenty men. Because participants are always trying to move up a grade in the national rankings, strategizing is an important part of preparing to shoot. The competitors have to creatively plan how to hit each target in courses that change each week. They must also be prepared to improvise as they move their bodies efficiently to cut down on any superfluous motion that would add fractions of a second to their time. As the team moves on to a new stage, participants walk around the shooting area marked by an inch-high wooden boundary to work out the best order in which to shoot and reload. They hold their hands in gun positions, forefingers extended, letting off imaginary bullets while

counting how many it will take to hit each target. This seems to be an attempt to visualise the course in order to improve speed and accuracy. Doug told me that he plans each stage down to the number of footsteps he will take in-between shooting positions so that he always has a clear view of the target. The team often debated how to tackle a stage, with some of the more experienced shooters offering competing advice to novices. This provides more space for men to assert and negotiate their authority in the group.

While strategizing is communal, the act of shooting is entirely individual – ultimately it is up to each shooter to design their own run. An iPad is consulted for the shooting order and each man is called up to the starting position marked on the wooden perimeter. Shooters sometimes develop ritual gestures that help them to prepare for the extreme sensory overload and adrenaline that is to come. Some take their gun out and point it at a target, taking an unloaded "dry press" of the trigger before the referee shouts "make ready" to indicate that the participant should load their firearm. Here, competitors often take two or three slow breaths, calming their body so that it is as still as possible. I learned that this is sometimes necessary to tame anticipatory adrenaline and nerves.

The shooter indicates when they are ready with a nod at the referee who presses a timer which emits a piercing tone to indicate the beginning of the run. The competitor jumps into action, running to the first shooting position as he draws his weapon in a swift movement. Irregular staccato explosions roll over the hillside as the weapon discharges and overlapping echoes build to a crescendo reminiscent of rain on a tin roof while the thunder of bullets breaching the sound barrier rumbles beneath it. He runs to the next position while releasing an empty magazine, letting it drop to the ground before smoothly retrieving a fully loaded one from a pouch around his waist and inserting it into the butt of the weapon.

Knocking the final metal target off its plinth with the sharp sound of metal striking metal, he lowers his weapon. The team waits patiently as he strips out any leftover ammunition from the gun, opening the chamber to show the referee that it is unloaded and safe to be returned to his holster. When satisfied that it is safe, the referee shouts, "the range is clear" and the whole team descends on the stage to count the score, pick up bullet casings, and tape over holes in the target.

Most shooters act out a hard stoicism when it comes to their performance. Some smile or give a high five to a friend, but overt celebration is uncommon. Whether at the bottom or top of the hierarchy of skill it is good form to lower the gaze and reject compliments with a shake of the head. Admiration is met with statements like, “yeah, but I messed up that last one, it took me two tries to knock it over”. This modesty can eradicate conflicts and is sometimes accompanied by a combined effort to think of how they could have shot better.

While competing I found that I could barely remember the specifics of my movements during each stage as adrenaline brought me entirely into the physical sensations of shooting. My body remembered the training I had received and automatically took over to perform the necessary manoeuvers of un-holstering, lining-up sights, and pulling the trigger in one flowing motion. Tom told me that this total absorption is what prevents shooters from improving. Ideally after years of practise competitors should reach a point where they are totally conscious and calm while tackling each stage. He said of himself:

> The first two matches [I took part in] were a blur. I was just trying to hit the targets, count my ammo, and stay safe. But, now I can stick to a plan I made in advance. Like when I’m going to reload, even if my gun malfunctions, I don’t panic. Plan ahead because you won’t have the mind-set to adjust once you’re going.

Tom progressed quickly while I was with the shooting team, but he was never satisfied with his performance and would compare himself unfavourably to some of the more experienced competitors. He said that shooting is frustrating because ability can vary from day to day depending on subtle changes in mood or a disrupted sleep pattern.

Participants pay close attention to each other while they are shooting, giving advice about the rhythms of the body, demonstrating alternative stances and techniques to novice team members. In the time that I was able to participate in the shooting match I found that men were suddenly eager to impart wisdom. Doug identified that I had a tendency to anticipate the kickback of the gun before finishing the trigger press. This means that I would push the muzzle slightly forward as I pulled the trigger, narrowing my eyes and tensing my shoulders in what felt like a natural reflex. This meant that my aim was slightly skewed to the lower left portion of the target rather than the centre. Doug told me that this is a common mistake for beginners who are not comfortable with the powerful after effects of pulling a trigger, but warned me that the error "could mean the difference between you and the other guy in a gun fight".

While the aim of the sport is to be as functional, fast, and safe as possible, men also add their own stylistic flair. Shooters borrow moves from heroic figures they admire. While waiting to shoot they might place their elbows on their holstered weapons, leaning casually like cowboys depicted in western movies. Some hover their hands near their weapons as they get ready to draw, fingers twitching like Clint Eastwood in *The Good the Bad and the Ugly*. These imitations suggest that there are ways of literally *acting out* stylised shooting techniques. While each man wants to achieve the best time and accuracy on each stage, there seems to be a desire to maintain a continuity with historical or fictional representations of gun use.

Establishing a play frame can mean that actions that would be interpreted as aggressive or dangerous in another context are often seen as desirable or commendable (Bateson 1987). At shooting matches, the game is established by the framing mechanisms discussed above so that when a gun is fired at human shaped targets the action is accompanied by the qualifying meta-communication that '*this is play'*. As Hamayon says: "it may even be that the essence of play lies in a partial denial of the meanings that actions would have had in other situations" (2016: 64). However, there was no such denial of risk and danger in this shooting team. They initiate a play frame and participate for fun, but the fact that they were also training to shoot people was an accepted part of the sport.

I often felt a sense of vulnerability and anxiety at USPSA matches. The sound of weapons firing from six different stages put me in a physiological state of constant awareness of danger. The ricochet of bullets creates an elastic buzzing sound and I had to resist a strong desire to duck when it seemed like one passed directly overhead. At one match I noticed that the shooting range porta-loo was riddled with bullet holes. These feelings of vulnerability were made worse one week when I arrived to find that our team had suddenly doubled in size. I asked Tom why this was and he replied that a man had died at a similar match nearby after someone had accidentally shot him while competing. The range had immediately closed, but undeterred by the fatality, many of the stray sports shooters had joined our match.

Sharing in a potentially risky activity can form strong bonds of attachment (Besnier, Brownell, and Carter 2017). Proximity to risk and its accompanying thrill becomes addictive and I found that the better I became at shooting the more competitive I got with myself about my performance. The brief 40 seconds or so that it takes to complete a USPSA stage puts the body under extreme stress, often followed by a sense of relief. My day to day responsibilities felt less heavy after participating in such an intense experience. As I discussed in chapter four, the importance of the physical experience of shooting cannot be underestimated in explanations of how people form relationships with firearms. The way in which shooting and carrying a gun changes how someone sees the world in turn makes them more likely to want to have access to them. There is a feedback loop between gun rights ideology (or politics), ethical norms, and the body. This creates particular ways of attending to the body (Csordas 1993) that interprets physical experiences of fear and places them within a narrative that fits with gun rights rhetoric.

Shooting sports act as a powerful counter-balance to the day to day flow of the competitor's white-collar existence. As middle to upper income bracket professionals in southern California, many of my informants have jobs that require social intelligence more than a capacity for violence. Tom, for example, is a retired Navy engineer who now teaches productivity strategies to businesses in San Diego. He says that he looks forward to the weekends when he can just enjoy himself at the shooting matches as if this is his time to really be himself. Competing puts these men in the quasi-natural and historically meaningful landscapes in which the mythology of gun ownership was formed (the Americana shop fronts help to evoke this).

USPSA offers a brief window in each week where participants lose themselves in a game in which they get to pull on the clothing and personality of an imagined heroic self who is willing to save hostages from bad guys. This grants them access to particular qualities of American masculinity that might be absent in other domains of life. The joking style of interactions allows them to affirm and test the limits of a hierarchy built around their capacities to wield a weapon effectively. This shooting team is a reassuringly stable social group that also allows individual participants to innovate and improve their shooting. Many said it was a fun way to learn the skills they need to protect their families and communities.

Masculinity, Competition, and Consensus

Interactions at shooting matches were characterised by competitive joke telling fuelled by an awareness of a hierarchy based on shooting skill and performed masculinity. This was evident at my first match when Tom introduced me at the shooters meeting by explaining that I was in San Diego from Scotland. Many of the shooters whooped and cheered at hearing this, but enthusiasm turned to groans as he said that I was a researcher studying gun ownership. Tom joked, "Joe is doing his research on our gun culture, hopefully he's going to write something favourable about us." The range officer turned to me and said, "so long as you play by the rules we won't have a problem" then turned to the crowd and shouted through his mega-phone, "this is Joe, he's a guest here, help him out if you see him".

This interaction shows the fluidity of the group dynamic. My presence was celebrated until the shooters realised that I was there to examine and understand rather than take part. The Range Officer had to reinforce the rules about "good character" in order to make sure I was welcomed. These quick shifts between joking, disapproval, and acceptance were common. At one moment men would be making fun of each other and laughing, the next it would be clear that someone had crossed an invisible line with a jibe or insult that might elicit a cutting rebuttal from another shooter. While competitors cooperate within their teams to run the match they also compare themselves directly with the men around them, enforcing a hierarchy based on skill.

This shooting team were predominantly men over forty years of age, but there were exceptions, including the eleven-year-old son of one of the best shooters on the team. The most skilled participants would often offer advice and guidance to younger members and occasionally

someone would try to bring him into the competitive jokes that structured interactions, but he seemed to prefer to keep to himself. He carried himself with confidence, tackling the courses with the mechanical precision of an experienced shooter. A number of older and more advanced shooters led the team by preparing the shooting area: picking up metal casings from the ground, acting as referees by timing each run, and collecting scores. They aimed to keep the rest of the team working *with* rather than *against* each other.

The de facto leader of the group was Dave - a stoic man who I found difficult to talk to in any length beyond the odd nod of encouragement or frown of disapproval. He finally started to acknowledge my presence when I became a participant rather than observer of the shoot. and seemed to feel more comfortable talking to me once he had seen my shooting style, ranked me in the hierarchy in his team, and seen evidence that I was seriously committed to understanding gun use. By the end of my time competing, he would occasionally take time to talk to me about my technique. Dave grew up in Canada, but has lived in the United States since his marriage to an American woman. He told me that he loves living in the US and values its attitude to personal liberty, including the "right to own a firearm" that is crucial to his continued participation in shooting sports.

Great respect and some distance was given to Adam - one of the best shooters on the team who's towering height and muscular form cut an imposing figure. A police officer by profession, he spent most of the matches I observed sunbathing quietly in a deck chair while waiting to shoot. However, his long silences were broken by bursts of rage that accompanied a failure to shoot well. This occurred at one match when a bullet became trapped between the magazine and chamber of his weapon causing it to jam. Angrily working the slide back and forth, he slammed his palm into the bottom of the grip to align the magazine. Adam's tendency to tackle the runs shirtless drew comments about whether he wore the same size of bra as his wife. These attempts to undermine him were often met with strong verbal rebuttals. When a less skilful participant once questioned his strategy he responded by equating his superior shooting abilities with his superior masculinity: "I don't tell you how to wear your thong, so don't tell me how to shoot". At one match, a younger competitor beat Adam's score on a stage before patting the furious man on the arm telling him, "I'll teach you how to shoot sometime". This was met with gales of laughter from the rest of the team and even Adam's angry muttering did little to silence them.

Humour is often used to regulate what qualities of masculinity are acceptable within groups of men (Kehily and Nayak 2010). It can evoke the tension between competition and consensus that is characteristic of games. Some ethnographic studies (Lyman 1987) have suggested that jokes can affirm an established hierarchy within a group by targeting less dominant men. This is obvious in Adam's refusal to become the subject of a joke by reasserting a hierarchy based on shooting skills, respect for his profession as a police officer, and an implied heteronormative masculinity. The use of homo-phobic and trans-phobic humour suggests that gender is indeed an unstable category within this team. Masculinity is competed over within a group that values a capacity to enact violence as a marker of successful male identity.

Joking can both undermine and reaffirm hierarchical structures. Because jokes can be framed as "non-serious", those who tell them can be critical of an established social order without being held accountable for those critiques (Sion and Ben-Ari 2005). This punching up creates solidarity within a group. Jokes about masculinity often deal with apprehensions around potential homosexuality and jokers can assert their own claims to heterosexuality through humour that positions homosexuals and women as symbols of passivity that contrasts with masculine potency. The subversive aspect of humour actually promotes the kind of bonding that is necessary for military groups to function. These kinds of jokes are characteristic of military humour (Sion and Ben-Ari 2005: 673) and are echoed in the sports shooting team I spent time with.

The military has a ubiquitous presence in civic life in San Diego and it was often present in discussions at USPSA matches. In one of the shooting bays at the range sits a sign that reads "We Support Our Troops" in bold letters. Many USPSA competitors have served in the military and Tom relocated to San Diego from where he grew up in New Jersey to serve in the military as an engineer. But, there is a major difference between the rigidly controlled environments of a military unit and USPSA matches. Although many of the competitors have spent time in the military, Tom and his team lack formal authority figures to target in their jokes. This means that humour is turned inwards and directed at team members. Because of this, jokes can sometimes create tension and disharmony rather than solidarity within the team. The relaxed environment of sports shooting does not necessarily call for the abrasive banter that characterizes military units, but it seems that old habits die hard.

Each match runs from 8:30 in the morning to late in the afternoon and as the hours passed conversation would often turn to politics. In the months following the 2016 election, Donald Trump's victory was celebrated and many took it as a sign that they would be allowed to keep practising their sport without having to worry that new gun laws would make their weapons illegal. Dave said "I'm buying all the ammo I can to last me two years while those communists in California mess with our rights. By then, DT [Donald Trump] will have overturned all these restrictions". The shooters often discussed recent instances of gun violence. The consensus was always that a police officer had been justified in shooting a civilian and that suicides or even mass shootings were individual mental health problems and not the fault of guns. According to these men, violence can be prevented by a well-armed populace trained in self-defence, not by disarming "good guys with guns".

These thoughts were often expressed within the framework of "personal responsibility" - the belief that each person is the author of their behaviour and that both success and failure alike emerge from effort rather than chance or structural constraints. This framework for interpreting behaviour was clear at one match when someone heard the ominous maraca-like sound of a rattlesnake's tail in a nearby sagebrush. The team stopped to listen and when its presence was confirmed engaged in a discussion about the best way to kill an invasive snake. "Just shoot it", offered one man, while another responded, "you can't shoot a rattler with a 9mm. A shotgun's what's needed". A third man said, "my dad used to hold its tail and crack it like a whip. It breaks their necks. Last time we had a snake here, I just grabbed it and threw it over the edge of the range". I was relieved that these methods remained untested as the sound faded while they debated, but one man couldn't pass up the opportunity to evoke personal responsibility. Working as a paramedic he said he had spent years responding to rattlesnake bites and that he hadn't "ever seen a snake bite that didn't deserve it". Another man agreed suggesting that it was "drunk or drugged up" young people who would wander into the desert without proper equipment and provoke a snake into biting them.

This exchange contains within it many of the key attitudes of this group. Firstly, that a rattlesnake bite must have been down to provocation from someone (a young person) who had not taken the time to understand the creature. This reifies an ignorance on the part of younger generations and links to a set of ideas that sees millennials as weak and unprepared for the realities of American life. In the reference to alcohol and drugs the men also affirmed the

irresponsibility of younger generations unable to master their impulses. Jack Flynn once explained to me why the rattlesnake is such an important symbol to gun owners:

> You may have seen the Gadsden flag, it's a snake that says "don't tread on me". The rattlesnake became a symbol of the new colonies, and it was a very fitting symbol, because if you know what the rattle snake does, it's a gentlemanly snake, it lets you know, it gives you a warning, [it says] "hey I really don't want to bite you, but if you mess with me I will", . . . we are not interested in going out and implementing, you know, being aggressive and initiating force with anyone, but also we know if someone initiates force with us, we will defend ourselves and keep what's sacred.

The rattlesnake therefore is said to lack any desire for violence, attacking only if provoked. Not only does this partly explain the disgust felt at anyone who might elicit a bite from one, but the animal acts as a useful metaphor for the defensive mind-set discussed in previous chapters. The reluctance of the team members at this shooting match to kill an invasive rattlesnake seemed to be related to their explanations that it is fundamentally a defensive rather than aggressive creature. They see reflected in the rattlesnake the peaceful qualities of their ideal American citizen who simply wants to be left alone. But, in the ominous shake of its tail and deadly bite they also see their practised capacity to respond to threats with force. Identification with these qualities may also root these men in the landscape of California, avoiding the need to express a sense of belonging to what they see as a corrupt liberal state.

In games throughout the world people imitate or use animals to symbolise particular characteristics that a team seeks to be associated with. The Buryat of Mongolia and Siberia imitate the gestures of a bull by stamping their feet as they prepare to wrestle, while the Tucano Mai Huna of Amazonian Peru identify with the peccary as they engage in public games (Hamayon 2016: 82). Animals can become meaningful symbolic expressions of collective identity and games allow people to use their bodies to play with the qualities they admire in their team's icon, as well as cementing any accompanying behaviours within a narrative that naturalises them as aspects of "human nature".

This shooting team comes together around particular symbols and political opinions that solidify group identification despite their occasional disagreements about shooting techniques and scores. Jokes, storytelling, and debates can help to legitimise the values and behaviours of

a group by creating a dialogue with everyday ethical concerns (Kehily and Nayak 2010: 76). The stories of rattlesnakes, personal responsibility, and self-defence link this play-frame to everyday anxieties about existential safety.

Tom expressed his confusion at those who would look down on shooting sports saying, "this is why I don't get the anti-gun folk. This is a fun sport and its perfectly safe". Tom sees his participation in this sport as entirely separate from gun crime. He claimed that it in fact cultivates the kind of responsible, ethical qualities that he admires in portrayals of American men in the western movies that he loves (see chapter two). But, shooting sports are also closely associated with warfare in their focus on weaponry and violence. The prospect of death looms over this sport in the same ways that it does in other contexts of gun use that I encountered in San Diego.

Historically, war and games have often complemented each other. For example, in ancient Greece warfare was almost constant, often more common than peace. This era saw the birth of the Olympiad athletic games which became a regular feature of public life as representatives from the city states of Greece came together to compete peacefully despite ongoing wars. Games also permeate Homer's *Iliad*. Prior to the siege of Troy, the leading heroes from each army battle for prestige and honour in an atmosphere of friendly amusement (Del Corno 2002: 18). Throughout contemporary and historical societies, participation in combat sports has been used as a method of training for war, but also of working out real conflicts (Cornell and Allen 2002: 4).

Both games and war are "used by men to construct a political identity for their community" (Cornell and Allen 2002: 9). As evidenced above, this kind of male bonding occurs in modern sporting contexts as well. Like play, war is organised around loosely regulated rules and conventions that dictate what weapons can be used and what constitutes unreasonable force. These rules are sometimes broken, but this behaviour provokes condemnation from the international community who may even use force to ensure that rules are maintained.

Games explicitly position men against each other by establishing victory at the expense of another as a key component of gender identity (Kehily & Nayak: 2010). Play fighting, even when directed at targets rather than at each another, acts as the ultimate test of masculine status, fusing violence with play in the pursuit of displaying a capacity to physically dominate (2010:

72 - 73). Sport is one way in which male bodies can be constituted and known through disciplinary practices (Wacquant 2004) and serves as evidence that competition, violence, and hierarchy based on differing bodily capacities is a characteristic that all men share, thus reinforcing heteronormative masculine ideologies (Connell, 1995: 58).

Like the war games of ancient Greece, playing at war through shooting sports pits men against each other in a competitive hierarchy, while also preparing them for what they see as the kind of war they are likely to encounter in modern America. Competitors gain a sense of security from established rules and a hierarchy of shooting skills. It is reassuring to know who one is and how one should act every second Saturday of the month.

Shooting Socials

Many of the gun owners I spent time with believed that if people could be convinced to try shooting they would automatically be converted to the cause of gun rights. This faith in the activity itself comes from experiences of shooting like USPSA, where bonding with others combines with a sport that connects my interlocutors to their bodies, to the natural environment, and to an ethical mission. With ambitions to become a powerful political force, San Diego County Gun Owners designs a number of events to reach out to a variety of communities. One way it has done this is with shooting socials, in which the organisation's members teach groups of people how to shoot. According to Michael, facilitating a friendly and safe first time experience with guns can change minds, "it turns people into gun owners so they care about our issue, it turns them into activists . . . and hopefully the bug will bite them like it bit us". He claims that SDCGO have taught over six hundred new shooters in the last year and a half, including groups of city council members, medical professionals, realtors, school board appointees, and even church congregations.

These events are often held at gun ranges around San Diego. At one event I helped Michael to set up a classroom for twelve novices from a local school board. As they arrived and met their instructors from SDCGO many of them made nervous jokes asking, "should I have worn chaps?" Another said to Michael, "I hope we are alive at the end of this". I watched Michael battle with irritation at the association between guns and violence as he replied that there would be a thorough safety briefing. Michael told the group that "today isn't about politics, it's about

fun, and above all, safety". This experience, he says, will show them that there shouldn't be a taboo surrounding gun ownership in California.

Before relocating to the shooting area, Michael introduced Mark, a Navy firearms instructor and SDCGO member who will be acting Range Officer (RO) for the evening. His voice was filled with the confidence of a man used to wielding authority and yet he made an effort to put touches of warmth and humour in his speech. Mark told me later that he loves running shooting socials because they give people a chance to see that:

> Gun guys are nice and friendly really. We aren't scary. It's an experience that brings people together. It's all about introducing people to shooting in a relaxed environment with their friends, so they can see for themselves the truth about guns rather than the media lies.

Each novice was matched with a mentor and the pairs took a lane in the shooting area where wooden and cardboard targets had been set up three yards from the firing line. Mark would occasionally shout out an order, his voice carrying easily over the group even through hearing protection. I watched as novices brought guns carefully into their eye line, their mentors offering words of encouragement before the first cracks of discharge began. Some of the new shooters gasped and screamed in delight, turning to look at each other with big smiles or nervous sighs. One woman kept screaming in delight and her mentor said that she was "a natural". Obviously pleased with this she stopped so that she could take a selfie in front of her target peppered with bullet holes.

As I have discussed throughout this thesis, my own physical experience of shooting was not initially one of joy. I felt jolted into a heightened sense of awareness whenever a gun went off next to me. These novices seemed to have fun, although several looked shaken from the sensory overload. One woman had to stop half way through distressed about the level of noise emanating from her weapon. She retreated to the front desk for a moment of calm and to ask for an extra set of hearing protection.

When I asked Mark why he likes running these events, he replied, "for the smile on their face after they let off that first round". Michael Schwartz talks about what he calls the "first shot smile". He describes this as a feeling of elation that follows when someone pulls a trigger for

the first time and notices that they have not been harmed. SDCGO even produced a video for their YouTube channel in which they filmed a 16-year-old girl shooting an AR15 for the first time. She holds the rifle up to her shoulder, wobbles under the weight of it and fires, before turning to the camera with a shy smile unable to stop herself giggling. Along with the importance of guns for self-defence it is these moments that Michael often focuses on in his marketing, highlighting the fun and the camaraderie that can come of shooting:

> I think the big advantage we have is its very fun. I don't know how many people I've taught, but I would guess it's in the hundreds, and I've seen people being taught for the first time in the thousands, and everybody always has fun.

The owner of a gun range that hosts shooting socials in North County told me:

> As an instructor, I can't tell you how fun it is to have someone come in, a woman, who is shaking because she is nervous, they literally stop at the door listening for the gun shots they are so scared. [After] introducing them to firearms, they walk out, they stand taller, they give you big hugs. You got one more person in our camp. It's not as scary as the news made it out to be, they're not evil. If I'm tough then it's not going to hurt me. So, that's the part of activism that's fun.

As one SDCGO member said, "Shooting socials are a game changer; they go in afraid of guns the first time, but after a few rounds they start smiling, they start giggling". This love of and faith in the transformative effects of experiencing and even mastering the physical sensations of shooting is a core aspect of SDCGO's method of recruiting members. With shooting socials, Michael has hit upon a method of spreading the love and passion that his members have for the experience to de-mystify what gun owners do with their firearms. This is one way that Michael has managed to recruit members of the LGBTQ+ community in San Diego. At one event I attended in March, he enthusiastically pointed out that three of the shooting instructors were transgender women. Like shooting sports, these socials draw on the distinctive embodied experience of using a gun and converts what might be seen as a deadly activity into play. Here physical engagement with shooting becomes the moment of conversion. My interlocutors love shooting and they have a deep faith that learning how to shoot would give people an embodied sense of empowerment, a connection to historical and contemporary national goals, and a new social group.

Conclusion

USPSA competitors would occasionally bring their children to shooting matches. They sat lounging on wooden tables or in deck chairs with hearing protection perched on their heads, playing on iPads and phones to pass the time. There were moments when I worried about their presence at an event that had resulted in a fatality at a nearby range, but some in the team hoped that they might one day compete. For now, they were lost in the virtual worlds of online gaming. Their parents were, of course, also lost in their own game. One established through a frame that sets the rules for what kind of gun use and behaviour is appropriate. One that evokes ethical challenges by simulating a home invasion, requiring the competitor to shoot enemies as quickly as possible. This places the players in a historical drama of good guys fighting bad guys in a struggle to keep one's family, community, and nation safe.

Play is a versatile framework for understanding the way social relations develop within this context. It can account for the ways that people prepare to defend themselves by playing within simulations of such a threat with varying degrees of cooperation and competition. Despite the hierarchies that form between shooters, participants form deep bonds as they take part in an adrenaline inducing sport. They also see skilful use of a gun as part of an ability to act out a successful male identity, drawing on historical interpretations of American men as protectors of innocents and the nation, while violently resisting those who would threaten them. Play accounts for the ways that prescriptive social rules and blueprints for identity that exist in society at large are embodied, tested, and renegotiated through action.

Ethnography and its accompanying practice of thick description relies on the principle that more data is good data. But, it can also cause the researcher to overlook the importance of initial short explanations that people give of their behaviour. I realised that I was doing this when I spoke to Liz Hart from the Liberal Gun Club, who explicitly highlighted "fun" as her main reasons for owning firearms. What people say when given the expansive room of an interview evokes correspondingly dense explanations that differ from those given in the heat of the moment. Both USPSA matches and shooting socials gave me an insight into how guns are used within a context that is predominantly about enjoying the physical practice and bonding with likeminded people.

Like many of the men in his team, part of Tom's reasoning for taking part in USPSA was to prepare for self-defence. Fun and play contain within them the seriousness that gun owners often attribute to their desires for firearms. Despite this, the shooting team I observed also thought of fun as a perfectly legitimate reason to pursue their sport. A focus on play allows the statement, "it's just fun", to take on the meaningful qualities that it has to my informants. However, a central component of the game is the presence of the gun. For tennis you need a racket and ball, for sports shooting you need a gun and ammo. In the next chapter I focus more closely on what the gun *does* in relationships with humans. Using a combination of ethnographic and theoretical insight I critically examine psychological studies that claim to show that firearms raise levels of aggression in their wielders. Thus far in this thesis I have explored how humans play, train, socialise, and fight for or with guns - now I want to focus on the object itself.

Chapter. 6

Do Guns or People Kill People?

Throughout this thesis I have been mapping out how a particular mode of engaging with perceptions of existential insecurity draw their authority from personal experiences with firearms as well as a sense of belonging to a social and national-historical community. I have examined the ways in which social groups, ideologies, and historical representations inform how guns are used, but in this chapter I want to focus on the subjective relationship between guns and people. How do gun owners conceptualise the object and how does it become embedded within their perceptual experiences of the world?

I will centre this discussion on the famous National Rifle Association (NRA) slogan, "guns don't kill people, people do". Here I want to unpack what exactly is being communicated when it is used to explain gun violence. This raises a number of questions that cut to the heart of how my interlocutors conceptualise the way in which objects can mediate human behaviour. One

gun owner told me that, “it’s evil people who make objects dangerous”, while others would joke that their AR15 rifle never shot anyone while it was locked in a safe.

What these kinds of claims have in common is that they attribute blame for all instances of gun violence to the moral character of the person holding the weapon. According to the NRA and SDCGO, firearms play the same role as an electrical conductor – good and evil flow through them effortlessly (Latour 1994). The validity of this perspective is never questioned and the statement pre-empts any evaluation by drawing on modern individualist understandings of free will that privilege human minds as the ultimate prime movers in their environments. The slogan acts as a powerful rallying cry among a community of people who believe that a strong society should honour the sovereignty of the individual.

This raises deeper concerns over the role of free will in human behaviour more generally. It underpins the ethical thinking that I explored in previous chapters by suggesting that those who commit gun violence are irreversibly evil, their actions mediated by nothing other than a failing moral compass. According to many of my informants, evil exists in the world. It is propagated by “bad guys” - a distinct category of inhuman monsters and psychopaths. Learning to shoot “bad guys” makes sense within this explanation of human behaviour and makes violent crime an inevitability. It is one example of how the framing and catchphrases of the broader debate about gun ownership and gun regulation are reproduced and made concrete within communities that form tangible relationships with firearms.

On the opposing side of the debate, gun control organisations, like one I spent time with in San Diego, overtly reject the idea that guns are neutral in interactions with people. They place some of the blame for violence on the object itself, suggesting that an otherwise good citizen who becomes angry can be turned into a killer in the presence of easily accessible firearms. Their anger can now be expressed in the form of deadly violence, the gun acting as an amplifier of human will with its own pull to particular behaviours - including the one for which the weapon was designed.

But this either/or approach doesn’t capture the nuances of how people enter into mediated chains of causality with objects. A person is of course required to hold and operate a gun, but equally a gun is necessary for shooting to occur. Neither the gun nor the person could perform the skill of shooting without the other - together they form a hybrid with extra-human capacities

to inflict harm. Latour (1994) has used the NRA's slogan to explore how the goals of an agent (a human being) can be influenced, amplified or changed entirely in contact with a second agent (a gun). This is a useful way of conceptualising how guns "act" on human beings, but it doesn't say anything specific about what those actions are or why there seems to be such a great deal of meaning attached to them in specific contexts.

Ingold critiques Actor Network Theory, suggesting that it can be difficult to grasp what role agency plays in the animation of both human and non-human matter. Materials, he writes, "are brought back to life in the dreams of theorists by conjuring a magical mind-dust that, sprinkled among its constituents, is supposed to set them physically into motion. Action follows agency as effect follows cause" (Ingold 2007: 11). In Actor Network Theory influenced work, agency is a kind of spiritual substance, the root of all meaning and action in the human world, but with no clear boundaries. I want to acknowledge but move beyond this approach. In the intimate moments of shooting, when guns and people merge, the way in which agency or intentionality is produced and distributed suffers from black-boxing, becoming all but invisible.

In this chapter, I explore whether there are alternative ways of unpacking this black-box. In this approach, I am guided by a number of related questions.

1) *What kind of entity is produced when guns and humans merge in particular actions (i.e. shooting) and contexts (whether framed as violent, playful, political, or ethical)?*
2) *What unique physiological states and perceptions are produced in this hybridity, and how does it influence a person's behaviour?*
3) *If a distributed theory of agency (like ANT) cannot account for how guns and humans interact, how can we evaluate the claim that "guns don't kill people, people do"?*

First, in order to account for the physical processes that produce hybridity, I utilise Donna Haraway's (1985) metaphor of the cyborg – an entity made up of a combination of machine and human that emerges when dualisms are transgressed. Cyborgs are experiences of subjectivity that have been created across human and non-human matter to produce hybrids with extra-human skills. The term cyborg is more of a useful imaginative tool than a theory, one that helps me to understand how my informants map out social and bodily realities through their relationships with firearms, but also other gun owners.

These hybrids are held together by more than physical proximity to firearms, in many ways they are, as Saramifar (2017) has said of AK47 wielding Hezbollah militants, "enchanted" by the physical object of the gun. This enchantment creates a union between gun and person through quasi-magical beliefs about what these objects can do, including their ability to preserve life and defend fundamental ethical principles. I will explore this idea by looking at how my interlocutors came to inhabit new physiological and perceptual spaces as they began carrying firearms in public for the first time following a change in San Diego County's concealed carry laws in November 2018.

Next, I look at the contexts in which people form close bonds to firearms to give clues as to how this relationship functions. A series of social psychological experiments have aimed to explain the qualitative changes that occur when people come into contact with weapons. The resulting theory, or *Weapons Instrumentality Hypothesis,* gives a window into the "black-box" of a gun-human cyborg. However, these experiments can take the analysis only so far as their conclusions imply that the way in which a gun impacts on behaviour depends on idiosyncratic personal histories. This is where an ethnographic gaze can open up greater depth.

Over time, I came to appreciate the important role that the object itself plays in a person's way of looking at the world. It's magnetic associations with violence, death, ethical dilemmas, and even play creates deep bonds within a community that organises around defending the right to own firearms, but also those who organise against gun ownership. In the final part of this chapter I will show that guns inspire a kind of obsession and embodied co-habitation even among those who fear them. Through a discussion of a gun control group I spent time with in San Diego I will show how guns play a role in particular ways of theorising the world, whether for those who are distanced from them or those who live in close contact.

Embodied experiences of firearms inform a set of ideas, beliefs and habits that define what Bordieu calls "doxa" or taken for granted ways of interpreting the world. Indirect encounters with guns and gun violence have become daily realities for many Americans and it is in the absolute certainty of one's own beliefs about firearms that determines how they interpret and responds to these events. This is further reaffirmed by political rhetoric and campaigning that references a field of *doxa* (Bourdieu 1977).

I argue that theories that distribute agency in unknown ratios between people and objects are unable to account for what guns do. By taking a look at an object's context it is possible to see the broader flows of change within which a "thing" is caught. Rather than privileging the human mind or the gun as the location from which all original action flows - as the question of whether guns kill or people kill implies - I want to suggest that in order to properly understand what a gun does to humans it is necessary to appreciate the multiplicity of factors that converge to bring it into its form, location, and action, including its life as part of a hybrid entity with people and its important cultural significance.

The gun, like all matter, does not exist but occurs. It is caught in constantly changing states of material and ideological formation. The embodied experiences of a shooter can define the meanings that are attached to a gun. I argue that the hybrid entity that forms between people and guns is its own kind of object, a conceptually bounded thing that is writing the story of a moment. This hybrid entity can be deadly when angered, but also playful when engaging in sports shooting. These are the contexts within which a firearm is relationally and meaningfully constituted. Despite this, I aim to evaluate the qualitative impacts that guns have on people's behaviour – particularly on the likelihood that someone will commit violence against themselves or others.

The need to label guns as either "good" or "evil" reflects the way that people order their world into categories that help them to see complex moral dilemmas as questions of either/or. I argue that this simplification allows for the kinds of debates that can be seen on any television news show following mass shootings. The question of whether guns or people kill people is not salient because it accurately captures the way firearms act on people, rather it continues to be a feature of the gun control debate because it is constitutive of social, ethical, and political identities.

Concealed Carry Hybrids

One of San Diego County Gun Owner's main political battles while I was in San Diego centred on the right to obtain concealed carry weapons (CCW) permits. The desire to arm in public is drawn from a particular set of ideas about ethical conduct, both personal and collective. As I discussed in chapter four, gun owners see the capacity to wield a firearm in situations when a "bad guy" threatens innocent people as part of what is means to be a moral citizen who acts to

guarantee the safest possible society. Gun owners spoke at meetings and in interviews of anxieties they felt at being unable to carry in public.

However, its technical illegality in San Diego County did not stop some gun owners from arming. Those who had experienced abuse or violent assault in their past often defended this by saying, "I never want to be a victim again". Others framed their actions in legal terms with comments like, "I got my permit in 1791", referring to the date that the Bill of Rights was ratified. The irony in all of this is that the desire to arm in public is a relatively new phenomenon. There are no federal laws that refer to the issuance of CCW permits, but each state has now created a system for individuals to obtain one. Illinois began issuing in March of 2014 and Washington D.C. only started in 2015 (Baum 2013).

Nevertheless, concealed carry is a growing national phenomenon. As journalist Dan Baum (2013) writes in his auto-ethnographic account of concealed carrying in his home state of Colorado, laws requiring a permit to carry a concealed weapon go back to the early 19th century. However, up until the end of the 20th century it was only merchants who worked in dangerous neighbourhoods or the wealthy and well connected who could obtain such licenses (2013: 29). SDCGO executive director Michael Schwartz acknowledged that the trend in seeing private gun ownership primarily as a means to self-defence is relatively new. Both Dan Baum and Michael suggest that this changed in the 1980s and 90s. As I discussed in chapter two, rising crime rates and an abundance of hyper-violent cop shows set on troubled urban streets in America combined to produce a unique sense that the average citizen was under a new kind of threat – often ethicised, sometimes communist, and positioned in relation to a murky illegal drug trade that played on fears created by the Regan administration (Baum 2013: 27)

While most jurisdictions passed tighter gun regulations in attempts to combat rising crime rates, in 1987, the Florida state government created an agency that would issue a carry permit to anyone who wanted one for the purposes of self-defence. In the years since, many states have adopted similar policies. In 2011, the Government Accountability Office[6] found that there were around 7.8 million active concealed weapons permits in the United States in 2011 (GAO 2012: 75). According to economist and gun rights author, John Lott, the number of Concealed Carry permits held by US citizens increased by 215% during President Obama's term in office (Lott

[6] A federal agency that provides auditing, evaluation, and investigative services for the United States Congress.

2016; 1). In 2017, he puts the number of permits at 16.3 million nationwide. If he is right, this means that 6.5% of the adult population regularly bears arms in public (Lott 2017). This does not take into account those who choose to arm in "constitutional carry" states where a permit is not required. There also seems to be a spike in interest in obtaining CCWs in the wake of widely reported mass shootings like San Bernardino in December 2015 and Orlando in the summer of 2016 (Lott 2016: 5).

Lott claims that Obama's focus on gun violence during his presidency caused an anxiety among gun owners that they were about to lose their ability to privately own firearms which motivated them to seek out ways to expand their access (Lott 2016: 6) - although he admits that there was a widespread trend towards the adoption of CCW laws in the years preceding this. Some of my interlocutors cited the LA riots in 1992 and the unrest in Ferguson, Missouri in August of 2014 as reasons for buying their first gun or obtaining a CCW. These perceptions of danger have continued to fuel the impression that America is becoming more violent – a narrative that Donald Trump used to great effect in his presidential campaign and which continues to set the context for many of his policies. The proposal of a wall along the border and his ban on immigration from some Muslim countries has created an environment in which white Americans are encouraged to fear anyone who seems 'other' to them. Gun owners convert feelings of fear into a motivation to ensure their embodied safety by obtaining a concealed carry permit for personal protection.

Upon submitting a CCW application in the United States a citizen is likely to find that they live in one of two kinds of states - "shall issue" or "may issue". A shall issue state allows an applicant to obtain a CCW if the state's requirements are met, but it is ultimately each individual county's sheriff who has the power to grant or deny a citizen's application based on their own criteria. Depending on the state, these criteria range from the provision of basic information like date of birth and place of residence, to taking a handgun safety class. In shall issue states there is no need to state why the applicant might specifically need to arm in public and "self-defence" can be used as an acceptable reason for obtaining a permit.

On the other hand, may issue states have further discretionary powers. Obtaining a permit is dependent on meeting "good cause" requirements. In these states self-defence isn't always seen as a legitimate reason for issuing a CCW. Authorities take the applicant's "moral character" into account, meaning they have to submit character references as well as credit history.

Applicants must demonstrate that they are at significantly greater levels of threat than the average citizen, but issuing authorities can still arbitrarily refuse permits without disclosing their reasons for doing so.

California is a "may issue" state and leaves the interpretation of good cause to individual jurisdictions, meaning that in San Diego it is Sheriff William Gore's policies that determine who obtains CCWs and why. For a long time, Gore refused to issue a permit for the purposes of self-defence - a constant source of frustration for Michael Schwartz who worked to change the Republican's policy over a period of two years. In 2018, SDCGOs backed a challenger to Gore in the November mid-term elections. Despite the candidate's Democratic affiliation, he promised that he would issue CCWs for the purposes of self-defence. Michael claims that this rattled Gore who worried that he may be in danger of losing his position.

Two days prior to the election, Gore caved to pressure from San Diego County Gun Owners and announced that he would also begin issuing CCWs for self-defence following his re-election. Michael is certain that this swung the election in his favour as many gun owners felt that when it came to a choice between two candidates who would issue permits that they would rather vote for the Republican who aligns with them on other policies. The conflict between Gore and the San Diego County Gun Owners over these permits demonstrates what can happen when a motivated community of gun owners puts their collective desire for weapons at the centre of a political campaign.

In a return trip to San Diego in November 2018, Michael told me that he booked an appointment to obtain his CCW with the Sheriff for the day after the midterm elections. The attempt was successful and when we met he said that he had started carrying a weapon in public at all times. He said that his first week of carrying felt "weird". Constantly aware of the gun sitting at his hip he was on high alert, paying particular attention to how he moved through public spaces. However, over time it has become part of his experience of being in the world. Ultimately it has changed his perception of reality. "It didn't necessarily make me feel safer, but I feel more able to handle situations", he placed emphasis on the final two words by looking around the restaurant, pushing his hands into the table cloth in a gesture that indicated that he felt like he was in control. He spoke of the five stages of mental awareness that I discussed in chapter four, saying that he has always felt that he exists in a state of awareness of what is going on around him, choosing places to sit where his back can be against a wall, facing the door in order to

keep track of people coming in and out of the room. This suggests that the calm he has gained from carrying a firearm has eased an unnerving state of awareness that has been present in Michael's life for some time.

During this return field trip I was also able to catch up with Tom Pallazzo, a San Diego County Gun Owners board member. When I asked Tom if he would consider getting a concealed carry permit early in Spring of 2017 his first response was, "I'm leaning that way, but it's a hell of a lot of responsibility". We talked a little about how it would feel to carry a gun and he said that he didn't like the idea that "any interaction could be a lethal one if you are wearing a gun". On the other hand, he suggested that he might be calmer in the knowledge that he could match a threat to his life with lethal force.

In November of 2018, Tom was in possession of a concealed carry permit and now sleeps with a firearm by his bed - he told me that this is "because you never know when something might happen". This has transformed his experiences of being in public, making him more aware of how people move through space and informing his idea of what constitutes "suspicious behaviour". In order to remain safe, he has a highly regimented daily routine of loading, unloading, and disassembling his weapon. This ritual occurs in the same order each day and with a focused attention to detail that he says prevents any accidents or oversights. He told me that one morning he lost his focus while going through the familiar steps and made himself start again from scratch.

The sudden availability of CCWs in San Diego County represents a major change in the embodied life of Michael and Tom. Their ability to arm creates a whole new way of paying attention to the world as they move through public and private spaces in San Diego. A hybridity emerges from the constant presence of a firearm that might produce new goals and behaviours, like positioning oneself in public to be aware of threats. Both suggested that they now feel a sense of "absence" when they leave their weapons at home. Tom said that, "it's like I'm more vulnerable [when unarmed]". Where vulnerability would not have been perceived before obtaining his concealed carry permit, he now feels unsafe when he is unable to carry. The gun seems to engender this specific fear and is equated with an absence of safety. Michael told me, it "has become pretty comfortable. I feel naked when I don't have it on me", suggesting that the gun has become as vital to his daily routine as clothing.

Throughout our conversation in November 2018, Michael also expressed a general cynicism about the capacity of humans to be good. He talked about some of his friends who are police officers, lamenting the situations that they have had to become involved with saying "you wouldn't believe the things that people can do to each other". His motivations for concealed carry are drawn from his imaginations of the worst acts of violence that he knows can occur because his friends have told him about real experiences they have had.

For Michael, there is another motivation for arming now that his organisation has successfully won the right to carry firearms for self-defence in San Diego. "Imagine if something happened and I wasn't carrying . . . [he paused] . . . me!", pointing to his chest with his thumb he took the role of someone telling himself off, "Mike! What were you doing out without protection?" In this statement, his position at the head of a gun rights organisation comes to define his need to carry a gun. The imagined shame of being faced with violence and being unable to counter it with a firearm is part of a self-perpetuating process of identity construction. He almost seems to suggest that it is a decision beyond his control because he has to be seen to be leading his organisation by using a right he helped to gain.

As my interlocutors started to carry firearms in public, new ways of attending to the body emerged as gestures, techniques, and skills were acquired (Leder 1990; Csordas 1993). Tools and machines can supplement physical capabilities and over time sink into the unconsciousness of the body. This process of "incorporation" (Leder 1990) extends the functional absence of the body to an object or skill, cementing associated habits and dispositions into the unconscious – or what Bordieu calls *Doxa*.

The embodied behaviours and symbols that reproduce *Doxa* structure an individual's actions, but can also solidify into more lasting dispositions and habits that place interpretive frameworks onto experiences of the world. The more stable the objective structures are, the more fully they reproduce themselves in a person's mind, the greater the power of a field of *doxa*. This is further compounded when these dispositions are confirmed and reinforced by the practices of other members of a group or by social institutions which reference these practices (such as the National Rifle Association, San Diego County Gun Owners, local gun ranges, and political leaders). When the private experiences of shooting meet public recognition and expression they undergo a change of state, partially reconstituted within an already established discourse (1977: 170). When habitual behaviours, symbols, and mythical structures match the

internalized structures of the mind, a political or ethical order that is essentially arbitrary and contingent can appear as self-evident.

In the examples of Michael and Tom I see how my informants augment their biological capacities in contact with firearms, translating features of their contemporary and historical social order into the gun. However, it is worth asking whether in this process they also inscribe some of the features of the weapons into their way of being in the world? Do aspects of the gun seep back through the permeable border between self and object? Does its exploding muzzle and strong physical kickback impart any lessons about the role of violence in human life? These objects seem to exert a gravitational pull on gun owners who design their lives to accommodate firearms within their ideologies, social groups, and bodies. There is a merging of subjectivities between guns and their owners. But, the problem of black-boxing remains: what exactly is communicated across the boundary of human and non-human materials, and how does this influence specific behaviours or feelings such as aggression and fear?

Opening the Black Box

Doug is a gun rights activist in his 70s who collects firearms on his rural property in San Diego. His life-long career as an engineer allows him to give a more precise view of what is going on as guns become incorporated into the body. Doug told me:

> I think I enjoy guns for another reason. . . I enjoy the aesthetics of them. Older guns that have bluing on the metal, that have finely made wooden stocks. I enjoy the manufacturing precision that goes into making firearms. I don't enjoy seeing crappy low quality construction of anything . . . I'll go to a gun show and I'll walk around and look at all the guns that are available. And many of them I won't have any feeling for them, but then there will be some that I really say, boy that is a really nice looking gun. And I've bought 22 rifles in the last few years because of their aesthetic appeal.

Some guns appear to have an aura to Bob. They jump out at him as he walks around gun shows. And although he presumably applies technical expertise to his decisions when purchasing new firearms, there is also a less tangible appeal about some guns. When Bob is searching for antiques at local gun shows, it seems as if a gun can sometimes choose him. He elaborated on what guns mean to him through another hybrid relationship he has with a machine, saying:

> I'm a pilot and I've owned a bunch of airplanes and you become part of the machine. You depend on the machine and if you know the machine well, you won't make mistakes with it. Machines don't let you down because they're predictable, they'll do what they're supposed to do . . . I think that's one of the most interesting and important relationships that we've created in this whole industrial revolution of ours, a dependence, and a love for, and an ability to do better things because we built tools.

Machines here seem to be elevated in status, granting the human being extra-capacities in its dealings with the world. Guns allow Bob to perform actions that he cannot with his own body. This was particularly obvious in a discussion I had with him about ageing and the sense of vulnerability that he has experienced as his physical strength has declined. He says that owning and carrying guns empowers him while in public, creating the perception that he is safe and protected by his amplified capacity to enact violence. The relationship that Bob has formed with this technology allows him to subjectively experience a sense of extended strength in old-age. The hybrid of Bob and Gun, creates an organism that has transcended or at least altered, its inevitable biological processes (Haraway 1985).

A theory within the field of social psychology explains the qualitative changes that occur in interactions between guns and humans. The *Weapons Instrumentality Hypothesis* or weapons effect, suggests that guns promote aggressive behaviour in humans regardless of context (Berkowitz and LePage 1967; Zimring 1968; 1972). In controlled laboratory experiments they found that the presence of a gun significantly increased the amount of electric shock that a participant was willing to give another person. A meta-analysis of 56 different weapons effect experiments found strong support for this hypothesis and noted that if a subject has perceived the potential for aggression within their environment the effect is much more significant (Carlson, Marcus-Newhall, and Miller 1990). This suggests that in real world contexts verbal conflict can more often lead into physical violence in the presence of a firearm, thus increasing the likelihood that an interaction becomes deadly.

Berkowitz (1974; Berkowitz and Alioto 1973) later suggested that the weapons effect depends on the meaning that people attach to guns. For many Americans, firearms are linked with concepts of aggression and hostility, but others use guns in non-aggressive activities such as sports shooting. If one is repeatedly exposed to the gun as an instrument of aggression (for

example, in television and film media or on national news shows) then the object becomes linked with violence. When a gun is perceived in an environment it can activate closely linked concepts that are associated with it (Bartholow et al. 2005: 49). Thus, highly accessible aggressive thoughts may colour interpretations of ongoing social interactions or make violent resolutions to social conflicts seem normal or appropriate.

Building on this research, Bartholow et al. (2005) investigated whether personal history and experience with weapons has an impact on the operation of the weapons effect. These experiments included a control group of hunters and found that the same objective stimulus can activate different associated concepts depending on the subjective meanings attached to the weapons under analysis. Hunters have more specific knowledge and varied experience with guns than non-hunters. For this group, images of firearms activated pleasant memories with family or friends rather than aggressive concepts and behaviours (2005: 54). Note that the researchers take it as a given that shooting animals is free of violent associations.

The reactions that someone has to the presence of a gun in fictional or real contexts depends on whether they are associated with negative or positive memories. For many hunters and other gun owners, firearms can be seen as tools used for sport or the maintenance of land (Bartholow et al., 2005: 49). As the researchers concluded, "these meanings often derive from idiosyncratic personal histories" (Bartholow et al. 2005: 49). While this literature provides a useful body of work to investigate the way in which guns impact upon human behaviour, an anthropological approach can investigate how subjective meanings are generated and enacted in relationships with firearms. If psychology can tell us that the object seems to evoke particular concepts that are associated with the way it has been used in the past, ethnography can show how these concepts function in social contexts.

I want to critically examine the claim that those Americans with a detailed knowledge of guns and pleasant memories associated with shooting them must inevitably lead to the activation of non-violent subjective meanings. None of my informants owned guns primarily for hunting, although many of them use their guns in the context of sport and socialising. However, they also explicitly link firearms to violence in the defensive mind-set that they cultivate in order to respond quickly and automatically to the potential for violence. This was clear in the account of two informants who have recently gained the right to arm in public and whose imaginations of violence animate their daily interactions with guns. One set of experiments found that the

more frequently a link between an object and a subjective evaluation is activated, the more likely that evaluation will be spontaneously activated in the presence of that object (Fazio, Chen, McDonel, and Sherman 1982). The process of imagining and training to respond to threats with deadly violence may lead to increases in the likelihood that one will respond with such force.

As I hope has been clear throughout this thesis, there are many ways in which gun use is tied to violence in the minds of my informants. In chapter two, I showed that the overwhelming cultural image of the gun is one associated with violence (even if this is conceptualised as defensive) and the physical training my interlocutors engage in is geared towards shooting people (even if they are "bad guys"). This would suggest that not only does the weapons effect vary between gun owners and non-gun owners, but that it is complicated further by the multiple and often conflicting meanings that my interlocutors attach to firearms; occupying roles as both objects of play and violence. As I showed in chapter four, defensive shooting courses push gun owners to consider what it means to take a life, at what point they may be willing to do so, and how these decisions might be explained within a coherent ethical system. This ethical framing helps to explain why they have so often inspired devotion from those who use them, becoming closely associated with moral concerns about life and death, violence, and identity.

But, the gun doesn't just enchant enthusiasts, it can also capture the imagination of the gun control activists who work to reduce gun violence by arguing for the stricter regulation of firearms. Violence and aggression become associated with firearms which imbues them with a heavy presence in the lives of those who hate the object. The gun pulls a number of unwilling parties into its orbit, inspiring both love and fear.

The Opposition

During the first months of my fieldwork, I grew frustrated at how slowly I was gaining access to gun rights activist circles. I decided to start attending monthly meetings with a local gun control advocacy group – one that was positioned as the most direct and local opposition to Michael Schwartz and his San Diego County Gun Owners. The public relations representative of the group, Mark, would often appear next to Michael on the same local news shows following a shooting in San Diego County, each putting forward their arguments for or against

gun ownership. Michael said that he has a friendly relationship with the man, but that they were on fundamentally different sides.

The gun control group represents a national lobbying and activist organisation based in Washington DC. Unsurprisingly, the tone and messaging of this group was in complete opposition to the gun rights activist community. Even the public library where they held their meetings juxtaposed to the gun shops and restaurants where San Diego County Gun Owners gathered. Their activities centred on trying to activate sympathetic San Diegans by participating in direct action. They organised protests at local gun shows, awareness walks, and spread the word about gun control at county-wide events. They also organised their members to call the offices of local politicians to express how important the issue of gun violence and regulation was in their constituency.

Through getting to know some of these activists, I noticed that they often had similar reasons for joining. Many were motivated by particularly horrific mass shootings. The names of towns associated with these tragedies - Newton, Charleston, Orlando, Las Vegas - were uttered with quiet respect. They spoke of a moment of feeling that "enough is enough", which propelled them into getting involved in a gun control organisation. As is the case with many of my gun owning informants, these activists found a political voice because of the fear and disgust they felt at how dangerous American society was becoming. Similar to gun rights organisations, personal testimony and narrative is a central aspect of their messaging, helping them to procure funding to continue their activist work. Their annual fundraising event attended by state and county politicians, as well as one congressman, included a reading from the testaments of mass shooting survivors.

I couldn't help but feel that these meetings acted primarily as a chance for people to share their fears. Members were not short of ongoing evidence to convince them that they are right to worry about gun violence. Local instances of violence combined with nationally reported events to form an environment of constant threat among gun control advocates that reminded me of the way gun owners operationalised fear to motivate their members. However, while gun owners spoke in militaristic rhetoric that positioned their work as part of a "fight" to preserve gun ownership (see chapter one), the gun control group utilised the language of faith and healing to convey their message.

This was particularly apparent at one event I attended in December, 2016. On the four-year anniversary of the Sandy Hook elementary school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, the gun control group organised a candlelit vigil at a cathedral in the city centre in remembrance of the twenty children who were killed. The event brought together local Democratic politicians and an inter-faith coalition of religious leaders; one protestant priest, a rabbi, an Iman, and a pastor from an LGBTQ+ church. As the event began, I stood with the crowd in the cloisters of the church where the group had prepared a video that was being projected onto a screen in the courtyard. Young faces flashed onto the screen, victims of gun violence from across the country, accompanied by a message from the child's parents or friends about who they were and how they would be missed.

A reporter from the local Fox 5 News station picked her way through the crowd, occasionally stopping to interview someone. Each time this happened her camera crew would set up in the middle of the onlookers, forcing them to disperse for a clear shot of the interviewee. As we were called into the cathedral, the reporter gave a sombre introductory take to camera that framed the event as one side of a political debate about gun control and ownership. It was interesting to watch an event that represented multiple perspectives on gun violence in American society be reduced to the media driven narrative that prescribed two kinds of thinking on gun ownership –you've got to love it or hate it. Like the National Rifle Association's statement that it is people who kill, not guns, this packages a complex issue into two sides.

The service was led by the parish priest who I was surprised to hear had an English accent. She said that she was proud to see representatives of different faiths in attendance. Each of these speakers pleaded for a stop to gun violence of the kind witnessed at Sandy Hook elementary school. Congressman Scott Peters said some brief words that drew on his experience with how difficult it is to pass legislation on firearms in Washington with the NRA funding so many Republican campaigns, setting an uncertain tone to an otherwise hopeful event. Two members of the gun control group then played a cover of *Imagine* by John Lennon before closing the ceremony with a protest song written by a queer activist duo from Los Angeles.

This event highlights the ways that gun control advocates create a dialogue around the regulation of firearms. Their activities and literature is full of the language of "peace", "faith", "forgiveness", "remembering" and "togetherness", while San Diego County Gun Owners frame their political actions as part of a "fight" and declare that they "will win". Where

traditional conservatives in other parts of the country might utilise religious ideas and commitments in talking about gun ownership, in San Diego it is the proponents of gun control who are using faith to process their fear of a world in which gun violence and ownership is seen as all pervasive. They differ in approach from the gun rights activist community, but there are some striking similarities in the ways that they are motivated by fear of how dangerous society is.

Both communities are enchanted by the gun. Their public political lives are organised around it. Both use partial statistics to justify their proposed measures, and everyone derives a sense of purpose through their activist work. They also share a bemusement and lack of understanding of their political rivals. Both use the language of education and both have an almost holy belief in the other side's wrongness. Each claims that they have the "facts" and that by giving these facts to the general public their point of view will prevail. They compete for a share of this public by handing out literature in order to disseminate an educational panacea. Both sides of the debate agree that there is an objective reality to gun ownership and that they are the only ones that see it clearly. The other side is repeatedly accused of thinking emotionally instead of rationally.

The language of "reason", "rationality", "common-sense" and "science" are deployed stylistically in arguments that are ultimately speaking to meaning and emotion. In the highly polarised context of the contemporary United States, it helps to portray your side as the one backed by a commitment to logic or reason that privileges a folkloric understanding of how the scientific method operates. Statements like "the science says", "this study showed", "that's just logic", draw on a secular belief system that places faith in the tenets and liturgy of science, providing a linguistic script for constructing a persuasive argument. These arguments go down well among friends who already share the position, but when met with opposition they crumble because they represent fundamentally different ways of looking at the world. Each takes a different position on the question of whether guns kill or people do, meaning that they have opposing views on the role that objects play in violent crime. The media binary is reproduced at the level of basic principles through the stance that people on both sides take on these ideas.

In this way, both groups encounter firearms in an internally homogenous way: whether through embodied engagement, cultural representation, or witnessing the violent outcomes of the presence of firearms. This serves a political function and reinforces doxa, or taken-for-granted

beliefs. A field of *Doxa* relies on an unchallenged objectivity which obscures the ethical-political presence of taken-for-grantedness. The reality of *doxa* is only revealed when it meets competing opinions and discourse. In fact, what is at stake when pro-gun activists meet gun control advocates is precisely the line between a field of opinion and a field of *doxa*. Gun owners express very little disagreement about the benefits of guns, while gun control advocates all agree that guns are bad, but when the two groups come together there is a clash of taken-for-granted beliefs about an object which means both sides are literally unable to comprehend the other. The language of reason and rationality implies a kind of tested reality behind their views.

This helps to explain political polarisation and has implications for the way in which power is produced through particular kinds of rhetoric that references taken for granted views of the world. Bordieu writes that, "The symbolic power to impose the principles of the construction of reality – in particular, social reality – is a major dimension of political power" (1977: 165). The strength of a political leader can come from mobilising a group by announcing to them what they take for granted. It resonates because it literally describes the world as it is experienced for them. This rests on the relationship between authorised language and a group that authorises it. Donald Trump references a taken-for-granted view of the world when he talks of the dangers that exist in the world for the average American from crime and immigration.

Despite the valorisation of rationality, the messages that each group puts out consistently use emotional valence to convince target audiences. As I explored in chapter one, Michael Schwartz recognises that minds don't change when you talk down to people about their ignorance. Instead he designs his SDCGO marketing campaigns to appeal to people's sense of fairness, calling the fight to preserve gun ownership a matter of "civil rights". Dramatic but rare instances of gun violence, such as mass shootings or terrorist attacks, act as motivating events that inspire a fear of bad guys with guns on both sides of the debate.

As Trump was inaugurated into the office of President of the United States in January, I found that the gun control group was suddenly filled with an urgency and passion that propelled them to join forces with previously competing gun control organisations in order to form a "coalition against gun violence". From this point onwards their efforts focused on direct action - events like neighbourhood walks with police precincts to educate people about new gun control

measures and home safety as well as designing educational seminars on gun violence to give to schools around San Diego. They also started to express an awareness about the problems of building events around high profile cases of gun violence, worrying aloud at meetings that it might put people off their mission. Mark once asked at a meeting about whether these methods actually prevent them from doing concrete political engagement that would more directly influence law makers. He told me later that, "what we're trying to do is less sexy than what *they* are trying to do. It is easier to fight *for* something than to block access to something".

Matter or Mind

One key difference between gun rights activists and gun control advocates is the way in which they encounter guns. For Michael, Tom, and Doug firearms tangibly enter their lives in experiences of shooting and socialising. They are intimately familiar with the operation of firearms and thus reference their understanding of what guns can do against their own experiences and habits. Cultural ideas, images, and myths that associate guns with violence are tempered by personal encounters that do not suggest that guns are violent. On the other hand, guns are symbolic representations for gun control activists. They serve as signifiers of death, injury, and heartbreak that point to the effects they produce rather than to the objects themselves.

The meanings that people attach to objects always exist in relation to the changing material conditions in which a thing is caught. The gun is a thing that can generate its own specific kind of meanings that draw on its role as an important cultural signifier of a number of individual and collective American values, while also being a weapon that can be carried on the body and end a person's life. To focus on how an object's materials and function impact their environment is to de-theorise it, emptying it of metaphysical contents in an attempt to render it into a novel ethnographic arrangement (Holbraad 2013: 23). The value of this could be compared to the way a mechanic might take apart a car to view its parts in isolation in order to learn more about how the vehicle functions.

While I recognise the analytical fruit that approaches like Actor Network theory can bear, to suggest that guns have agency can only go so far in conceptualising the ways that they appear to be active in human decision making, but it can also reduce the complex ideological, ethical, and physical movements that constitute an object's behaviour in any given moment to an intangible substance with a vague definition and source. The meanings that objects take on and

reproduce arise in relation to a current of materials, social dynamics, and their larger embedded cultural life. They are active participants in a world in formation (Ingold 2007: 3).

As Michael, Tom, and Doug suggest, carrying a gun brings the object within the body. They had to develop new ways of attending to the body while negotiating their way through the world. On the other hand, they also said that over time the gun disappears into the body, becoming as normal as any other aspect of their embodiment. Carrying a gun synthesises the object into the subjectivity of the perceiver, thus collapsing distinctions between object-subject and mind-matter. In the act of shooting however, the gun once again makes itself jarringly known within embodied experience as the kickback, explosive discharge, and harsh metallic frame interact with the body of the wielder. In a dialectical process between perception and representation, guns can become part of embodied experiences in hybrid, inter-subjective formations.

As a researcher who was motivated to understand the ways that some Americans have become fascinated by firearms, I was also subject to the gravitational pull of guns. This interest was initially influenced by my confusion over how people could come to love an object about which I felt such a gut fear, but as I saw people firmly committed to defending the right to use them, I realised that there was something unique about the way in which people were drawn into meaningful relationships with these objects. This brought me into a relationship with firearms, one that caused me fear and anxiety, but occasionally excitement. How I felt while shooting often depended on how comfortable I was with each person around me. Those gun owners who made me feel welcome, who were light-hearted and kind would put me at ease. Shooting would become a kind of social target sport. In the moments when I felt alienated or at genuine physical risk I saw shooting as a cold, mechanical process made up of unpleasant bodily sensations.

Beyond these day to day experiences, my attitude towards picking up a weapon was also defined by wider cultural orientations towards guns that I grew up with. Both within a family in which firearms were seen as far-away things, unrecognisable as objects that could be in a home, but also within a nation whose citizenry do not value private gun ownership for the purposes of self-defence. My encounters with guns growing up were confined to being shown my friend's family shotgun at their farm in the country that hung above their mantelpiece. To me, this gun took on a role that more resembled an antique clock than a deadly weapon. But spending time around people who love guns and by learning to shoot, the gun took on a new

tangible role in my life. Carrying a firearm and storing one in my own living space changed how I experienced my own body and home, making me aware of how deeply embedded my aversion to guns is. This just shows the complex mix of influences - embodied, social, and cultural - that combine to form how one relates to these objects.

I was happy to leave the field knowing that I may never have to shoot again. I can't help but think that a lifetime spent around guns and the fearful attitudes they promote can negatively impact on someone's sense of safety. This could of course be because of my different cultural background. Was it my out-of-placeness that produced those sensations? If gun ownership was an aspect of my *Doxa*, of my taken for granted view of the world, maybe those emotions of fear would not have been so overpowering.

So, Do Guns or People Kill People?

As the psychological literature on the weapons instrumentality hypothesis shows, the presence of firearms can have qualitative changes on people's behaviour and attitudes, including their levels of aggression. But the question remains, does training to shoot and kill enemies with a firearm impact on the likelihood of someone using deadly force when confronted with a perceived threat? There is very little consensus in the literature from public health, criminology, or quantitative sociology about whether a heavily armed civilian population is to blame for high rates of gun violence in the United States. The sheer overwhelming physical presence of firearms makes designing studies that measure the impact of gun control measures on violent crime very difficult. However, there is one type of violence that is very clearly linked to owning a firearm – suicide.

Suicide is more lethal than all other kinds of gun violence combined. In the United States, roughly 50 people a day (that's 23,000 a year) take their life with a gun (Hemenway 2006). Rates of suicide have slowly risen over the last decade while most other kinds of gun violence have declined (Frattaroli and Zeoli 2013). One study of California residents showed that legal gun owners were more than twice as likely to die by suicide than the general population (Wintemute, et al. 1999). This kind of gun violence disproportionally affects young people (Cummings et al 1997), and white Americans are twice as likely to take their lives with a gun than African Americans, Hispanics, or Asian Americans (Hemmenway 2006). Furthermore, suicide rates are far higher in rural areas where gun ownership is most prevalent.

This suggests that understanding how gun owners form intimate relationships with firearms may be crucial in attempting to reduce gun violence. Decoding the desires, habits, and ideologies that bring firearms and people together can impart lessons about how that relationship may turn into one of self-harm. My interlocutors train to shoot and kill anyone who would threaten their lives, family, or nation. But, guns can also become intertwined with intergenerational family life, providing an ethically commendable hobby that also puts them in contact with likeminded members of their community and a national history.

In this chapter I have explored how firearms can merge into the daily lives of gun owners. This process of becoming hybrid creates new sensations, emotions, social groups, and motivations. My gun owning informants distribute their "self" across human and non-human materials, creating hybrids with specific desires and attitudes. The qualitative changes that occur across the boundaries of human and non-human can be observed and are openly discussed among gun owners who have begun to carry concealed weapons in public. Their fears are animated by the same images of gun violence that propel advocates of gun control into organisations that argue for increased regulations on the ownership of firearms. Guns can be conceived of as deadly when aimed at a victim or as an object of play when pointed at a target. In shooting it becomes part of a chain of motion with a human to produce a conceptually bounded "thing". However, the need to label the firearm as either "good" or "evil" reflects the way that gun owners have ordered their universe into a place of "good guys" and "bad guys" and is encouraged by the either/or framing of the gun control debate.

It is also perpetuated within the NRA slogan that takes a position on the question of whether guns kill people or people kill people. The framing of the question implies that the gun either takes over and acts for a person or has no influence whatsoever on action. The position that my informants take suggests that minds are somehow separate from the world and that all action comes from them to animate objects. In this interpretation materials are unimportant, while people have built machines, written declarations of independence, and founded a nation based on the sovereignty of the individual.

The question of whether guns or people kill people can be seen not as a salient description of the way firearms act on people, rather it takes on a role as a marker of political and ethical identity, allying the person on one or the other side of a simplified gun control debate. The movements that form locally around national political conversations can provide spaces for

theorizing the world. Pro-gun activists have to explicitly conceptualise a personal orientation towards what it means to take a life, what threats exist in the world, and how objects play a role in mediating human behaviour.

In this chapter, I have attempted to show how a slogan is lived and theorised in one community of gun owners in San Diego where the deeper philosophical implications behind the belief that guns are lifeless can lead to the formation of friendships and a social group. In some rare cases however, this idea can lead a person into violence against themselves or others. In the next concluding chapter, I will link together and summarise the main claims of this thesis, but also directly address gun violence in order to place my fieldwork within its national and local context of gun use.

Conclusion

> *20 years ago tonight, I was armed to the teeth, boxes of ammo, food and water stored, flint and steel, extra clothes waiting for Y2K to strike. Now, 20 years later, that's just how I live.* - Michael Schwartz

These words appeared on Michael Schwartz's Facebook page on the 31st of December 2019. While it contains the director of San Diego County Gun Owner's trademark sense of humour, I think it also speaks to the rapid way in which the practices and ideologies around gun ownership have changed over the last twenty years. Michael himself told me that he thinks the idea that firearms are primarily tools of self-defence is a relatively new phenomenon – at least in terms of its widespread appeal. In order to understand why this shift might have occurred I have explored the ways in which people can enter into intimate relationships with firearms through the practices of gun ownership. By taking part in shooting sports, self-defence training, and gun rights activism my interlocutors form strong bonds of connection between those they share in these pursuits with. The object itself has become a hotly contested commodity in contemporary America, holding significance both for the lives of citizens who own guns but also in political and media debates.

The normality of being armed to the teeth with stockpiled ammunition, food, and water in preparation for daily life is, I believe, largely a result of a debate that hinges on the notion that the American public can be divided into two kinds of position on firearms: one that sees guns as purely destructive, which leads to a belief that they should be removed from private hands, or one that thinks they are magical talismans with powers to further the causes of good. Throughout this thesis I have tried to sketch in the grey between these lines by looking at the lived experience of owning, using, and defending the right to wield firearms. The binary

rhetoric of the gun control debate leaves nuance at the door to television studios and legislative buildings, which has manufactured the very extremity of position it claimed to describe.

Throughout my conversations with gun owners and gun control activists, I noticed that their beliefs were rarely positioned on their own. They nearly always referenced an "other". For gun owners this other was the hysterical liberal, afraid of what guns could do, often framed as weak, or naïve, who simply wanted bad things to go away. For the gun control activist, the figure of other was constituted by an uneducated, Republican voting, firearms enthusiast, with a love of guns that borders on obsession and who represented a threat to the peaceful, tolerant and civilised country that they wanted to build. These stereotypes might sound absurd, but they existed as real for my interlocutors on both sides of this debate. Rather than coming into contact with the living breathing, complex face of a real opponent, they often only met their enemy on television screens where they already carried the label of "other" or "bad guy".

In this thesis, I have attempted to tell a unique story about gun ownership in America that embeds itself firmly in a local context to show the nuances of a life built around defending the right to own guns. I don't expect to change any minds, nor do I think I have necessarily changed my own. rather I want to echo Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2009) suggestion that there is always value in telling more than one story. In this conclusion I want to summarise the main claims of this thesis while looking to how this work contributes to contemporary anthropology. I will also show how it might help us look towards solutions to gun violence. By understanding those people who are most likely to own and use firearms, we can learn something about how the relationship between guns and people can become toxic or even dangerous.

The Story

Firearms become bound up with a number of different aspects of life. They can be experienced as part of the body, occupying perceptual space. They also become linked to a person's sense of existential safety as perceptions of danger are placed into dialogue with national and local gun rights rhetoric that conceptualises firearms as the most effective tools of self-defence available for private citizens afraid of or at an increased risk of attack. This links the physical sensations of shooting and carrying a gun with an understanding of the complete self.

Guns can also become part of a community or social group. They gather enthusiasts around them at shooting events where the camaraderie and competition that accompanies any sporting or recreational context creates bonds of mutuality. This extends further into the world of political activism where some gun owners can come together around a cause that is framed as a fight against people who would deny Americans the right to own firearms - a practice that they claim has been around since the founding of the republic. Gun rights activists reinforce popular ideas that associate gun ownership with national prosperity and expansion. Similarly, more contemporary criminal threats are seen as modern versions of these enemies. Remaining vigilante and training oneself in shooting is a way of marking the self, the family, a community, and a nation as safe. This means that the borders of the United States, including who belongs within them and why, are imagined through the use and political defence of firearms.

Decisions about who belongs within are often based on shared characteristics but nearly always involves the use of "others" to paint an opposing image against which members of a group can define themselves. At the individual level, stereotypes about dangerous immigrants and violent criminals mean that whole demographics of people are positioned as threats based on a few characteristics. This denies all sociological explanations of violent crime and dehumanises those who commit them, creating monsters that it is possible to both fear and legitimately kill. A whole ethical orientation toward the world springs up around this idea which sorts people into categories of "good guys" and "bad guys". The former are gun wielding patriots and the latter, dangerous psychopathic criminal others.

Of course these distinctions are more complex when encountered out in the world as opposed to when talked about at gun rights activist meetings. However, the physiological cues that gun owners experience when learning to shoot and train themselves to recognise act as diagnostic tools for sensing when one is confronted with a threat. The body becomes a kind of internal temperature gauge for assessing threat levels, which requires a detailed awareness of bodily processes including heartbeat, mood, breath, and stress. To carry a gun is to become more aware of one's psychological and physiological state while moving through the world. My interlocutors in many ways train in a mindful awareness of their bodies and the world that produces a sense of mastery over their autonomic processes and thus a calm in each moment. However, from this place of physical security they become hyper vigilant and focused on the potential for dangerous encounters.

I have argued in this thesis that shooting is a kind of meditation practice or, as Joan called it, "gun yoga". A shooter ideally has to slow down, get in touch with their breath and their body, steady their mind, and focus on one unmoving point on a target. Everything comes into stillness apart from the index finger on their dominant hand, which slowly inches back before an explosion begins with the descent of a hammer onto the base of a bullet. A booming crescendo reverberates through the skull as the silence of the previous moment dissipates in overlapping echoes that roll over the open desert. Much like practitioners of meditation this involves a great deal of mastery over bodily and sensory processes, but rather than cultivating compassion or peace of mind, gun owners use this skill to develop their capacity to more accurately and effectively shoot enemies. Because they look down the barrel of their firearms with fear, fear comes into being to meet that gaze.

Fear was a major theme throughout my fieldwork. I found that those on both the left and the right who had stakes in the gun control debate were often motivated to get involved with activism out of fear. This could have been gun control activists who saw too many reports of mass shootings and were finally motivated to find a way to protect themselves and others. Or the conservative who saw the same reports and were finally motivated to take the steps they saw as necessary to protect themselves and others. Both sides of the debate seek safety and a way to overcome fear.

So, what is fear? I have been struck throughout the process of writing this thesis by the number of times my understanding of fear has changed. It is a complex, multifaceted physiological experience that I grappled with personally during fieldwork as I a placed myself in contexts in which I felt at physical risk or focused my attention to an unhealthy degree on the likelihood of experiencing gun violence myself. I realised that for myself, and for many of my interlocutors, fear contains within it a number of contradictory motivations and emotions. As well as the familiar sweaty palms, scattered attention, and icy grip around the stomach that accompanies feeling threatened, fear also contains with it the potential for joy. Overcoming or mastering fear is adrenaline inducing and can produce a sense of purpose or wellbeing that I recognised each time I left a shooting range with all of my fingers.

Fear can become the object of somatic modes of attention (Csordas 1993), guiding how one both understands the body and interprets the behaviour of others as friendly or not. Fear can have both negative and positive valences. The perception that there is a possibility of death can

become exciting, even addictive. Fear is fertile ground for personal development. It poses a question that only you can answer. And just as fear is a diverse experience, so are responses to it. With the burden of knowing the uncertainty of your death, people sometimes reach for spiritual practices, they sometimes climb mountains, they might take drugs, or they might attach a deadly weapon to their hip that speaks to both the omni-present potential for death, as well as the possibility of preventing it. A love of life, of family, of country, and of firearms holds within it the fear that motivated my interlocutors to enter a gun shop in the first place.

Contribution to Anthropology

This thesis moves into unique ethnographic territory and is only the 2nd full length ethnographic study that explicitly focuses on understanding gun owners (Kohn 2004) and my work builds on previous contributions (Springwood 2007; 2014; Doukas 2012; Shapria 2013; Gusterson 2016). Much anthropological, as well as journalistic research on gun ownership tends to focus on male perspectives, suggesting that guns act as symbols of masculine strength that further reinforce a patriarchal hierarchy by granting an already dominant group of Americans the means to back that dominance up with violence (Young 1986; Connel 2005; Burbick 2006; O'Neill 2007; Melzer 2009; Stroud 2012).

My research has attempted to bring more complexity to this image by including female and non-binary experiences of owning guns and being armed in public. Transgender gun owners show the ways in which occupying a subject position that is at a greater risk of attack than the general population can act as a motivation to seek out personal means of self-defence. In gun rights rhetoric, my trans interlocutors find an empowering narrative that says they can move from being vulnerable towards existential safety by training within a firearm. Gun rights organisations like San Diego County Gun Owners and the Pink Pistols utilise this narrative in what Carlson (2014b) calls a "politics of vulnerability" that emphasizes that the unique circumstances of being under threat make firearms the easiest and cheapest solution to inequalities that have broad structural and historical roots.

These arguments about vulnerability however also highlight the extent to which male gun owners also feel under threat. Images from historical and contemporary fictional media construct archetypical notions of how people should act with firearms and what they are. This is often accompanied by a gendered subject position. In western and gun play movies that dominate the box office, a male - or increasingly female- identity is tied closely to an ability to

enact violence. My interlocutors absorb these images which sync with the rhetoric of their preferred news outlets and politicians who say that America is becoming more dangerous, meaning that its citizens need to toughen up and defend themselves. Internationally, America is positioned as vulnerable to attacks from dangerous immigrants from Latin America and the Middle East, but also from violent criminals within the US who are conceptualised as dangerous psychopaths. The United States itself is framed within the language of vulnerability politics as national safety is used as a narrative to rationalise gun ownership. A reversal of positionality occurs within contemporary conservative politics both at the individual level when my white male interlocutors claim that they need firearms to defend themselves from dangerous immigrants, and at the international level when they suggest that America has to have a strong military to defend against dangerous nations.

My interlocutors live within a universe of potential enemies who could take everything from them in a moment. What is less clear within the public image and rhetoric of gun rights however is the important role that fun plays in establishing this world. Bonding with others during the long hours spent at desert ranges combines with the sincerity of their task to create strong friendships and community. New social groups are built around the use of firearms that reinforces the moral value of this practice.

I also expand on anthropological work on gun ownership in the US by focusing explicitly on the physical experience of shooting. The sensory experience itself is memorable. It is like nothing else I have ever done and is one of the key reasons that my interlocutors cannot conceive of giving up their weapons. Just as a weightlifter will enjoy going to the gym or a musician will compulsively pick up their instrument for relaxation, gun owners come to love the experience of firing a gun. It requires skill, mastery, and can cultivate patience. But it also provides a sharp break from the white collar, professional lives they lead by throwing the body's nervous system into a stress response that they learn to overcome with controlled breathing. That is a skill that they can apply in other areas of their lives when they become panicked or feel threatened. It was only by taking the time to become somewhat proficient that I came to appreciate just how important the experience of using a gun is and why it can help to explain why so many Americans want to own them.

Attitudes to gun ownership link to how people vote, how they engage with an ethical life, and how they conceptualise their role within a family, a community, as well as in a nation.

Bipartisanship is becoming a real lived experience across America, creating communities of mutual distaste with opinions that form a taken for granted way of looking at the world, or *Doxa* (Bourdieu 1977). People come together in opposition to an "other". Helped by different media outlets, my interlocutors tell stories of otherness to maintain a bogeyman image of their enemies, painting broad brushstrokes and assuming the worst about political opponents, but also about the potential that their fellow citizens will cause them harm. My fieldwork occurred just as Donald Trump came to power and this provided me with an opportunity to study how this political moment has impacted on people's day to day lives. As I have shown, the way in which both gun rights and gun control activists go about engaging in political debates either at home, at activist meetings, or in public political contexts has evolved in dialogue with national events like the 2016 general election and highly publicised mass shootings.

My research shows the extent to which technology combines with habits of the body to create new ways of perceiving and imagining one's place in the world (Bourdieu 1977; Leder 1990; Csordas 1993). Conditioning the body always includes within it an ethical goal. In learning to shoot, ethical motivations could be as diverse as having the means to protect yourself, through to creating a peaceful society policed by morally upstanding citizens. Gun rights rhetoric contains within it a strong moralising discourse that creates an ethical life out of the physical practice of becoming a proficient shooter. This can give real structure and purpose to one's life in the same way that a religious or spiritual practice might.

Ethics are made in day to day life within bodily habits that cement particular ways of thinking about and perceiving the world. Learning to shoot creates a specific way of being aware of and understanding the emotional content of the body that can provide personal evidence of gun rights ideologies. The way in which people and guns come together can be most easily described as a hybridity (Harraway 1985) between two different kinds of matter – the mechanical firearm, built to kill, but often used for sport, and a fleshy, living, breathing human being.

I move beyond Latourian approaches to understanding the role that objects play in mediating human agency by looking at the ways in which people and firearms come to form one bounded entity. By reflecting on the way in which I came to relate with guns, I noticed how they can place a lens on the world as you walk around with an enhanced awareness of the permeability of your body and the capacity to inflict deadly harm. I felt more fear than I had at any other

time of my life being around so many guns while I was in San Diego and while my experience is not the same as my informants, what this shows is that that there can be a powerful emotional, psychological transference between people and firearms. I saw the way that my interlocutors changed when they were at the range, feeding off the adrenaline of shooting and enacting a civic right that they believed would keep themselves and America safe. They were in personal, emotional relationships with their weapons that linked to their understandings of politics, ethics, death, and their role in a family.

As my interlocutors trained to shoot their enemies, they bring within their bodies the power of life and death. They cultivate a personal sovereignty that is seen as a necessary division of violence that takes some of the monopoly away from the state. This creates a legitimate space within the self for deciding on matters that would normally be reserved for the police force or judicial system. Defensive shooting courses spend time on this issue and ask their students to reflect on what it means to make these choices, but it is the physical drills that embed these abstract ethical deliberations into habits of the body. The question that remains to be answered is, do these habits become automatic responses to threat? And how would it be possible to study this if they do?

We Need to Talk About Gun Violence

In November of 2018 I returned to the field to find my interlocutors shaken by a recent mass shooting in nearby Thousand Oaks, California. Interestingly our conversations at this time revolved around how I thought gun violence could be prevented. They expressed real curiosity about whether my research could help to create solutions and spent time questioning me. One gun owner even said, “I worry that the only solution is to take away all the guns”. Michael Schwartz in particular seemed disturbed by the shooting. He spoke at length about the real fear children feel going to school now. He said that he doesn’t want them to suffer but that the solution isn’t clear, wondering whether the problem is caused by bullying, social isolation, mental health, or firearms. I found this encouraging but not entirely surprising.

The debate about gun violence in America gas become a divisive one. People retreat into partisan communities preventing us from considering the complexity or lived experiences of our political opponents. Whether or not a household contained firearms predicted which way it would vote in the 2016 presidential election more accurately than any other demographic

split (Cohn & Quealy 2017). Identification with one's political group often sets the limits of how one can think and talk about the issue of gun ownership. As a result, I have often found myself succumbing to a sense of hopelessness at the rigidity of both sides of the debate. However, I have found conservatives and liberals alike desperate to tackle firearm related harm.

We might overcome this divide and improve the public conversation with a better understanding of what we mean when we use the term "gun violence". It is too often used as a catch-all to describe the outcomes of diverse problems in American society. The violence that is reported on television news has a deep social and cultural life that cannot simply be seen as only a problem with gun ownership, although this is of course part of the picture. Gun violence as an analytical category does not allow us to adequately distinguish between the most significant kinds of harm and the true reach of their social costs.

As anthropological approaches to violence show, physical harm is never absent of social, historical, or cultural meaning (Kleinman 1997; Farmer 2004; Wacquant 2004). An approach that focuses on contexts that produce particular kinds of harm is in a better position to understand these meanings and therefore to design solutions that work. Violence manifests itself in specific contexts impacting communities in unequal ways that demand complex social analyses. By defining this violence in relation to an object we imply that the eradication of that object would solve the deeper problems it hides: soaring rates of mental illness that have seen an accompanying rise in suicide, the ways in which masculinity as an identity can pivot on capacity to enact violence, continuing institutionalised racism, and the kind of violence that overwhelmingly impacts women and the LGBTQ+ community.

It is important that we are precise in our day-to-day discussions about gun-related violence. There is also call for cautious optimism. Taken as a whole, gun violence rates have been declining steadily for decades (not-withstanding a slight increase in 2015 and 2016 [Murphy et al 2017]). However, this obscures the fact that suicides have increased, while gun related homicides have significantly declined. There are programmes and policies out there that have reduced violence and I believe that an ethnographic understanding of those who live around guns can contribute towards solutions to gun violence.

A Typology of Violence

In chapter five, I discussed the death of a sports shooter at a range nearby to the one that I attended. This shooting will be reported as an accidental death, a type of gun violence that has actually been on the decline, dropping by 48% since 1999 (Lee 2018). Today accidents account for around 700 fatalities each year. This drop is attributed to a number of educational gun safety programmes, but also to the regulation of firearm storage practices at the state level and a slight decline in the number of houses that own a gun. In California, one recent initiative encourages parents to ask whether a household owns firearms and that they are stored safely before allowing their children to accept invitations from friends. While awkward, this can prevent accidents where children find poorly stored weapons, using them without realising they are loaded. In the United States it is still more likely that you will be killed by a toddler than a terrorist (Younge 2017).

While I was in San Diego, a middle-aged white man shot eight African American residents of his apartment block while they attended a pool party, killing one and severely injuring several others. Reports said that it was only the proximity to a local hospital that saved them. This shooting occurred two blocks from my apartment and I could hear the sirens of the emergency services from my apartment. Mass shootings account for only a small proportion of gun related deaths - around 3% annually in the US (Wing 2016). They are the most visible form of gun violence and their impact ripples throughout communities, cities, and the national consciousness, but because of a lack of consensus on what constitutes a mass shooting in terms of numbers it can be difficult to assess whether these events are actually on the rise. Some studies suggest that they are becoming more frequent and more deadly – the record for the largest mass shooting of all time has been broken three times in the last ten years.

Because of their infrequency, it is very difficult to predict and prevent mass shootings. Better research is needed to understand the complex set of factors that can lead someone to attempt to take so many lives. It has been noted that shooters often draw on the techniques of and relate to previous mass killers. Behaviours that would not be possible without sensational coverage from a news media that aims to entertain and grab attention rather than inform. There are also links between mass shooters and experiences of social isolation and exclusion as young adults or teenagers (Markward and Markward 2001).

According to CDC data, the level of general crime in the United States is not any higher than comparable nations and firearm homicides are at a thirty-year low (Webster & Vernick 2013).

However, lethal violence is still roughly five times higher in America than economically analogous parts of the world. Many social scientists have claimed that this is because of a high number of firearms in private hands, citing studies which show that the presence of a gun increases the likelihood that the victim of a home invasion will die by three-fold (Richardson & Hemenway 2011). However, there are many other factors to consider.

Globally unprecedented rates of incarceration in the United States are linked to the kinds of gun violence associated with gang conflict which disproportionately impacts ethnic minority communities. The revolving door of courts and drug prohibition policies combine to produce a system (and images) reminiscent of the antebellum south. This raises the spectre of state enforced gun violence. As with mass shootings, the footage of police officers shooting African-Americans provokes public outcry ending in a similar stalemate of media punditry and political inaction.

The gun owners I knew were quick to remind me that the police shoot more white people annually, but this can be explained by the fact that the majority of the US population belongs to this demographic. In 2016, black men between 15 and 35 were still nine times more likely than any other group to be killed by law enforcement officers (Swaine & McCarthy 2017). The police brutality that many African Americans face is reinforced by a judicial system that has been shown to convict black Americans more often than white Americans for the same crimes (Burton 2015).

The impact of gun violence also varies by gender. To take one example, mass shootings are almost exclusively carried out by men. This particular form of violence seems to emerge from some quality of masculinity taken to the extreme (Black 2018). Men perpetrate more than 90% of firearm homicides and are also far more likely to be killed in them (Parks et al. 2010). However, there are 1.3 million reported incidents of intimate partner violence each year that overwhelmingly impact women (Campbell et al. 2003). The presence of a gun increases the likelihood that a woman will be killed in a confrontation by five times (Ibid).

Members of the LGBTQ+ community are also at a greater general risk of violence than the general population (Park & Mykhyalyshyn 2016), but there is little research into how the presence of firearms impacts this. Beyond direct injury and death, there are also “symbolic” forms of violence – non-lethal threat, intimidation, and coercion in which a gun is present but

never fired (Hemenway 2006). This kind of violence is much harder to account for in statistical analyses because it so often goes unreported.

Some state level policies that restrict access to firearms for perpetrators of intimate partner violence have been shown to reduce the total number of deaths (Frattaroli & Zeoli 2013). One key requirement for success is the implementation of background checks for firearm purchases that takes into account comprehensive disqualifying information. Background checks represent a simple and popular policy that can make gun ownership safer by prohibiting dangerous individuals from purchasing firearms. Surveys have shown that policies like this are supported by 84.3% of gun owners, but some states have not implemented background check measures and there is still no federal system in place (Frattaroli & Zeoli 2013).

As I discussed in the previous chapter, suicide is more lethal than all other kinds of gun violence combined. While the number of shootings carried out by people with serious mental illnesses represents just 1% of gun homicides, 90% of people who commit suicide have some combination of mental health issues (Knoll & Annas 2016). Access to firearms is one dimension to consider when trying to reduce suicide rates, but the availability of mental health services and broader drivers of suicide like socio-economic disenfranchisement and social isolation have to be taken into account. This requires a far broader shift in attitudes about the role of the government in providing care and treatment for those suffering from mental health issues associated with isolation or under-employment. Eliminating guns cannot solve the problem of suicide, but tighter regulation and screening might help to reduce rates.

Looking Forward

Each of these different types of gun violence emanates from a unique set of circumstances. They are influenced by historical and contemporary gender relations, institutionalised racism, socio-economic inequality, a lack of funding for the treatment of mental illness, and the absence of federal consensus on policies that reduce access to weapons for dangerous individuals. Gun-shot wounds cost the US tax payer $6.6 billion annually in emergency treatment for uninsured victims (Mohney 2017) – so gun violence is also an economic issue that puts a strain on the American healthcare system. It makes good fiscal sense to channel money and effort into the kinds of programmes that are working. Funding is needed for research that helps to understand and prevent firearm related harm to save on long term costs. The ban

on federal support for research into gun violence by agencies like the CDC has to be lifted (Jamieson 2013).

Despite historic lows, the death and injury that results from gang related conflict requires carefully tailored responses. Programmes like Cure Violence (2018) have reduced gun homicides by up to 73% in Chicago neighbourhoods by applying the techniques of epidemiology to the spread of violence. The organization trains ex-gang members in conflict mediation and leadership as they return to the community after prison time. These local figureheads then interrupt cycles of violence that would otherwise spiral out of control. Cure Violence has expanded its operations successfully to Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York. However, to tackle state enforced violence, larger reforms of the prison system are needed, as well as a shift away from militarised policing that targets minority communities .

So what role can gun owners play in reducing gun violence? As statistics on suicide rates show, it is in fact gun owners who are most at risk of gun violence. Gun owners were more than twice as likely to die by suicide than the general population (Wintemute, et al. 1999). This means that it is those who are positioned within communities of gun enthusiasts who are most likely to act as effective middle men in trying to reduce this violence. Gun rights organisations like San Diego County Gun Owners could start talking about the risks of suicide and start looking out for warning signs among their members. They could encourage a culture of openness and awareness about how mental illness can change the role that a gun might play in your life. In 2018 I found Michael Schwartz desperate for answers to how he could help to reduce gun violence and I think that he has a key role to play in doing so, but the right language has to be found that would resonate with his and his group's understanding of what firearms are and how they should be used.

The uncomfortable truth about gun violence is that solutions necessitate looking much deeper than the object itself. As I have shown throughout this thesis, I believe the object of the gun has a unique design, purpose, and quality to it that is important in guiding human behaviour, but it is also used a strawman for the larger structural issues that generate inequality, isolation, and violence in American society. This is not cause for defeatism, instead it is a call for the hard work necessary in understanding the complexity of the issue.

The skill set of the qualitative researcher is well suited to exploring the contexts from which violence emerges. In-depth interviewing, ethnographic methodologies of participation, and living among affected communities allow a researcher to dig deep into each kind of gun violence and to understand those Americans who live around firearms on a daily basis. We need to be specific when we talk to each other about this issue, or teach about it in schools and universities. A closer look at how each kind of violence manifests itself in American communities can tell us exactly what the problems are and how to design effective solutions.

Reflecting on The Process

I started this PhD with the intention to make an intervention in the gun control debate by not only shedding new light on the problem, but also by using the evidence I would gather to construct solutions to gun violence that would appeal to all perspectives of the political spectrum. No small ambition. Through the process of data collection, organisation, and writing I have not abandoned this hope, but I have grown more sceptical about the potential for any interventions I could suggest. By listening to gun rights and gun control activists I believe I hit on a bigger problem that underrides the gun control conversation: the tendency for political opponents to dehumanise those who do not agree with them. The labels of Democrat, liberal, Republican, libertarian, and democratic socialist have become identity categories that can cut across gender, race, class, and religion.

"Othering" is a far bigger problem than a PhD thesis in anthropology is capable of tackling, but by deconstructing the way I was dehumanising my political opponents, represented in such a stark fashion by gun owners, I also came to appreciate the position from which they are speaking about issues about which I had no interest in understanding. Just as I have my own sense of how things should be, or *doxa* (Bourdieu 1977), so right wing American firearms enthusiasts have come to their perspectives within an internally logical and consistent life course. By re-humanising this group of people, I came to understand that no amount of evidence based policy and empirical study that shows a link between violence and gun ownership will change my interlocutor's minds. The positive impact of guns in their life is experienced as felt while shooting and through the connections they have made with others. In order to reduce gun ownership to levels that are comparable with other economically analagous nations, a major shift in national attitudes towards gun ownership would have to occur. A process that might be triggered when people like my interlocutors feel that they are valued and safe. It sounds both simple and incredibly complex at the same time.

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